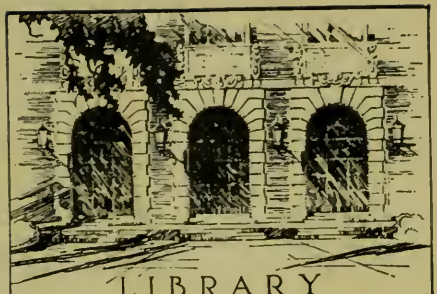

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THE WEIRD SISTERS.

THE WEIRD SISTERS.

A Romance.

BY

RICHARD DOWLING,

AUTHOR OF "THE MYSTERY OF KILLARD."

In Three Volumes.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

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THE WEIRD SISTERS.

PART II. THE TOWERS OF SILENCE.

CHAPTER VII.

WAT GREY'S BUSINESS ROMANCE.

Grey found his mother in the front parlour of her own house. She was as bright, intelligent as ever, and put down the *Times* and took off her spectacles as he entered.

"Henry," she exclaimed, as he came in, "what is the matter? You are looking like a ghost."

"It is only that I have seen one, mother," he said wearily, tenderly, as he

kissed her, put his arms round her, and placed her in a chair.

"Seen what?" she demanded, looking up impatiently at her stalwart son.

"A ghost, mother."

"Nonsense, Henry. Of late I see but little of you; and when I do see you, you are full of mysteries, only fit for sempstresses in penny parts. You ought not to treat me as if I wanted to be roused into interest in your affairs by secrets and surprises."

She patted her foot impatiently on the floor, and looked with vivacious reproach in his face.

He placed his hand gently but impressively on her shoulder, and said, looking down calmly from his large blue frank eyes into her swift bright gray eyes:

"I am not, mother, practising any art upon you; I am practising a great art upon myself."

She now saw something serious was coming or was in his mind; and while she did not allow her courage to decline, or the resolution of her look to diminish, she asked simply,

"And what is that art, Henry?"

"That of enduring the company of a villain in the presence of the person I most respect on earth."

She looked round the room hastily.

"He can't mean this place," she thought, "for we are alone." Raising impatient eyes to his, she said, "I am listening. Who is this villain?"

"Your son."

"Say that again, my hearing——" She paused and put her hand behind her ear, and bent forward her wrinkled neck to catch the words.

"In your presence, mother, I am trying to endure the presence of your villanous son, my villanous self."

"Sit down, Henry," she said very quietly.

He sat down on a chair a little distance in front of her.

She thought, "His father never told me there was a taint of insanity on his side of the family, and I know there was none on mine. This is terrible, but I must keep cool. Perhaps it will pass away. We shall have the best advice. He looks haggard. The wisest thing is to make little of what he says." Then she said aloud, "Well, Henry, I suppose you are going to tell me something else?"

"I am going to tell you, mother, all man durst utter. The unspeakable must remain unsaid."

He leaned his elbow on a small table, and supported his brow with his thumb and forefinger, shading his eyes with the fingers and the palm of the hand.

She sat upright on her chair. It was

an easy chair, but she disdained the support of elbows or back. She thought his words, "The unspeakable must remain unsaid." "My son! my son! what has turned his poor head?" Aloud she said, "Tell me all you please, Henry."

"It is so cool and sweet and pure here, mother, in this house of yours, in your presence; I would give all the world if I might live here."

"Then why not come? That great empty house is too much for you, and you are growing morbid there. Come here at once, and it will be like old times to you and me."

"I am not so lonely in that house as you might think," he said, with a ghastly contraction of the lips and a shudder.

"But you see no one now. You have no company, and even at its best and brightest it was a dismal old barracks. Suppose, Henry, I live with you?"

He looked up suddenly, fiercely, and cried in a loud voice :

"No, no ; you must not think of that. That is the last thing likely to happen. How could you think of such a thing?"

His head, his head was clearly gone. Fancy his resisting such an offer from her in such a passionate, ill-tempered way.

"Then come and live with me ; the isolation of that house is preying upon you."

He had dropped his head once more to its old position.

"I am not so much alone there as you might suppose."

"I thought you saw nobody lately."

"But I am often, when at home now, in the company of Bee in her better days."

What splendid self-torture this was ! To dance thus before his mother on the brink of a precipice she did not see was

exhilarating. It was almost worth committing a crime to enjoy the contrast between the ideas these words brought up in his mind and his mother's.

"A bad sign," thought the old woman. "A bad sign of reason, when the mind of a man of his age is always with the past." She said: "I think it would be much better for you to shut up the Manor and come here. If you take my advice you would most certainly leave that hateful house. It was all very well when you were strong and happy to call parts of your house by horrible names, but when you are ill and weak and nervous you get superstitious, and full of foolish notions about those very things you have been playing with."

"Do you know, mother, I would not exchange my Tower of Silence for any castle in England at this moment; no, not for the fee-simple of Yorkshire."

The tone, the words, and the awful smile that accompanied them, cowed the spirit of the woman. "My God!" she thought, "this is worse than death. His reason is toppling, toppling."

She did not speak, but waited for him to go on.

"But, mother, there is another reason for my not selling the Manor."

"And what is that, Henry?"

"I am thinking of getting married."

"Married! Married!"

"Yes. Am I so old or so feeble that I should not think of marrying again?" he asked, with a clumsy attempt at a smile as he half uncovered his pallid face.

"No," she answered slowly.

"Then why are you astonished?"

"I did not say I was astonished."

"No, mother, but you looked astonished; tell me why? Why were you astonished at the idea of my marrying a

second time? Do you know any *reason* why I should not?"

This was a fierce pleasure. It was like stirring up a sleeping lion when there was no chance of escape save through a small door, before reaching which he might, if he awoke, spring upon you, seize you by the back, and batter out your brains with one swing against the bars. It was like mounting a parapet under fire, and standing there thirty seconds, watch in hand, expecting to be struck, and trying to anticipate where.

"Reason for your not marrying! No, I know nothing to prevent your marrying."

She did care to excite him in his very critical mental condition by reference to the little comfort he had derived from his experience of wedlock.

"Well, mother, it is not only that no cause exists why I should not marry, but an absolute necessity — a necessity

there is no evading, makes the step inevitable."

He had raised his head from his hand and was looking in her face.

"You have always had good reasons for your acts," she said, humouring his whim.

"And, moreover, it is imperatively necessary I shall marry one particular woman, and no other."

"What! in love again already!" exclaimed Mrs. Grey, with a desperate attempt at archness.

The attempt failed utterly, and her face wore a look of anxiety and pain. It was now clear her son did not suffer from mere hallucination; this was a break up of the whole intellect.

The man was so lost to external things he did not notice the change in his mother's face. He was deliberately rehearsing aloud his plan of campaign, and

counting his forces and chances. He had almost forgotten he addressed his mother. He knew he might speak out with safety. This was the first time he had dared to give utterance to his thoughts in the presence of another. There was intoxication in the fearless recital of his case, and, with his bodily eyes indifferent to things around him, he abandoned himself to the delight of speaking his secret thought, and observing how the uttered words lightened his burden.

"You are curious to know her name?" he asked, in a mechanical tone.

"I should like to hear who it is," she returned.

"It's a very good name. It will bring no discredit on the name of Grey. Guess."

"Indeed, I cannot."

"Maud Midharst."

"Maud Midharst!" exclaimed the old woman, relaxing the rigidity of her pose, and falling for support against the back of her chair—"Maud Midharst!" she repeated, in a tone of dismay. For a moment she had forgotten she was listening to a man suffering from severe mental disturbance. Instantly almost she recovered herself, and fixing eyes now full of tenderness and pity upon her son, resumed her upright attitude, and continued her former plan of humouring him. "She is very beautiful, very amiable, and very rich," the woman said.

"She is very beautiful, very amiable, and *very poor*," he said impressively.

Again Mrs. Grey started. His tones were not those of a man of unsound mind; and although his face looked pale and worn, and there was a queer expression in the eyes, the whole conveyed the idea of a man overwrought rather than radi-

cally unsound of head. She was so much thrown off her guard that she could not refrain from repeating aloud, "Very poor!"

"Yes, very poor," he went on in the same monotonous voice, and with the same lightless face turned to hers. "And it is because she is very poor I am going to marry her."

"A regular love romance!" cried the old lady in a sprightly voice. The tears were in her eyes. Her son, her only son, the idol of her life, breaking down thus in his strong manhood! Hard sight for a mother! How hard to sit still, and seem calm, and watch the light of departing reason flickering in those large blue eyes, which in the happy warm long ago had looked up to hers as the baby boy lay at her breast.

"A real *business* romance," he said gravely. "A real business romance."

"It must be a romance indeed if you

are marrying her because she is poor, for I believe you, Henry, are not rich." She thought, "Perhaps it will be best to take an interest in all this. If I do not he may think I suspect him of being under delusions, and I daresay that would make him worse."

"The Daneford Bank is now secure and in a prosperous condition, but I have nothing beyond its prosperity, so that, compared with the time I got the Bank, I am a poor man, for I have lost all my private fortune. Does it not seem strange to you, mother, that I, a poor man, should aspire to the hand of a baronet's poor daughter?"

"But, Henry, this is a love romance, and in love romances all things are possible."

"I have explained to you, mother, that it is a *business*, and not a love romance. But I have not told you half the romance yet."

"I am most anxious to hear it."

"I have never said a word of love to her yet. I do believe a word of love has never yet been spoken to her, and already there is a rival in the field, so that now we have every element of success."

"And who is this rival?"

"The new baronet, Sir William Midharst."

"Sir William Midharst! I thought he was in Egypt."

"He has been, but he got back just in time for Sir Alexander's funeral. He walked to the funeral with me, came back and fell in love with his cousin Maud."

"How do you know this?"

"Mrs. Grant told me."

"And does Mrs. Grant know you are in love with Miss Midharst?"

"No, nor any one else."

"I, for instance, know."

"Who told you?"

"You."

"Never."

"He forgets already what he told me a few minutes ago. This is terrible. I shall not be able to stand it much longer. My poor Wat! I wonder what has turned his brain?" the mother thought. She endeavoured to keep on her face an expression of vivacious interest.

He spoke again. "I never told you I was in love with Maud Midharst. I only told you that it is absolutely necessary I should marry her."

"In some things," the mother thought, "he is as clear as ever. Of course all this talk of his marrying Miss Midharst is the result of some way poor Bee's death affected him," she reflected. Aloud she said, "But, Henry, if you do not love her, and if she is poor and you are not rich, why are you compelled to marry her?"

"If any one knew the answer to that question, mother, that person could put me in the dock and convict me of embezzlement."

She started to her feet and placed her hand on his shoulder, and cried in a voice of agony: "My God, my son is mad!"

He rose quietly and put both his hands tenderly on her shoulders, and whispered hoarsely in her ear: "I am not mad now. I never was more sane in my life. I *was* mad when I stole Sir Alexander's savings to the last penny. It was with his money I saved the Bank."

"Great God, what do I hear!"

"The truth. I am no better than a thief. I have stolen the old man's savings and the young girl's fortune, and, unless I marry her, I shall be found out. Did I not tell you I was in the

company of a villain when I came in first? Now you believe me."

"And you lied to me when you told me about that money from the Pacific coast? Ten thousand times better madness than this!"

"I did."

"You, Henry, my son, lied to me?"

"Yes."

"Understand my question once for all. When you, Henry Grey, told me, your mother, that the Daneford Bank had been saved by money from the Pacific coast, did you lie to me?"

"I did."

"Then, sir, leave my presence and my house for ever!"

"Mother!"

"Go, sir, at once!"

"Mother, for God's sake! You do not know all!"

"Go, sir, at once! I do not want to

see any more of you—hear any more of you. You have brought disgrace on our honourable name. You had not the courage to face ruin, but you had the courage to face crime, and you had the baseness to lie to me, sir. Go, I tell you, sir, and let me see you no more. Let me forget there is a man alive who bears your honourable father's name. Do not let me see you again. Do not let me hear of you. You will not go, sir? Then I shall leave you. Remember, we never meet again."

She swept out of the room.

When she had gone he stood a while holding his forehead in his hands, then shook himself, left the room, and drew the front door after him with a low laugh, muttering: "And I did not tell her all. I forgot a part."

CHAPTER VIII.

MAKING HOLIDAY.

When Grey awoke the morning after the interview with his mother, he felt calmer than usual. He had slept better, and the air of early November was bright and crisp, and wholesome and invigorating.

He arose, drew back the curtains, and raised the blind. The leaves were all off the trees, and the bright sharp fretwork of oak sprays glittered in the morning sun. The grove was silent. All its winged lodgers had long since taken flight in search of food. The glades and caverns of the grove no longer sweltered under canopies of impenetrable leaves. Aisles, which

had been vaults of sultry gloom in summer, lay partly open to the sky. Here and there the eye could pierce the inter-twisted branches and catch sight of the mounds of red rotting leaves.

The grove no longer desired the screen of leaves to hide it from the eyes of man, to cover up the monsters of soft rank vegetation that throve and bloated until they burst with the unclean rottenness of excess. All things perishable in the vegetable domain were now melting down into the ground, there to lie until the spring-hunger of the seed and root moved and drank them in, to thrust them once more whence they lay into the green-giving air.

In the warm weather these juices, as they move about through the earth, are caught in the webs of roots and budding seeds, and are pushed upwards through the crust of earth, and by the sun dyed into a

coat of many colours to keep excessive heat from the under earth.

In the winter they are shorn of their beauty, and thrust down into all the crevices of earth, there standing incorruptible sentinels of ice to prevent the penetration of the cold.

The coming and going of these juices through the mould is the respiration of the earth. The breathing of all things grows less frequent as they increase in size. Man breathes twelve times a minute, the earth once a year. Can the heat of all earth's time be its share of one fiery expiration of the sun?

Grey stood gazing vacantly at the skeleton trees and the mounds of red-yellow leaves.

Of late he had observed that his thoughts came much more slowly than of old, and this was a mercy. This morning they scarcely moved at all.

"Like a skeleton," he thought. "The grove is like a skeleton from the bones of which the flesh has rotted, fallen through, and is lying down there under the ribs."

He shuddered, put his hand to his head, muttering: "No, no; I must not think of that; I must not think of that. I must think of anything but that. Of course, the exposure—it is nearly three months there now—has—has—and there is nothing left but—Oh, God! No, no no; I must not think."

It took him a long time to collect his thoughts latterly. This morning he was much slower than usual. It was those sleepless nights that made him so dull of mornings now. He had such thoughts and visions in the night that in the mornings he felt weary, worn out, jaded.

His mother!

Yes. He had not thought of that until now. That was bad, very bad. These blows were coming too quickly and too heavily, and that one was the heaviest of all. He had sought her in his sorest trouble, his direst fear, and she had spurned him, cast him off, expelled him from her presence for ever. She—she—she had been cruel to him — cruel to him. She was all now left to him in the world. He had squandered everything else in the world but her love and his love for her. He went to her in his direst need, and confessed a small crime and a little sin, an embezzlement and a lie only, and she had spurned him—more, it seemed to him, for the lie than the embezzlement. This was too bad. If she had spurned him for these, what would she do if he had told her of — of the other thing? Called the police perhaps. Well, after all, the police were not so terrible

to him now, for there was no one in all the world he cared for who cared for him, and he was free.

All things had gone well with him until now, until the funeral of the baronet. Since then he had learned he was not the absolute guardian of Maud, he had found out Maud had an admirer, and he had lost the affection and esteem of his mother for ever.

The blows were too fast and too heavy.

What should he do? He could not go on in this way. He should break down if he did not get relief. There was no use in going to the castle while that young fellow was there, and even if the young fellow were gone, the thinker was in no state of mind to push forward his fortunes with Maud. Indeed, there was absolute danger in going near the castle. In his present state of mind he might betray his designs on Maud, and

that would be ruin beyond retrieval. That young fellow was not likely to propose to the orphan a few days after her father's death. He, the thinker, would take a week's holiday, and come back invigorated for the game.

That day he went to the Bank and arranged everything for an absence of a week or ten days. He wrote a note to Miss Midharst, saying he was compelled by ill-health to leave Daneford for a week or so. He expressed his hope that while he was away Mrs. Grant would advise in any little matter on which Miss Midharst might in the usual course look to him for guidance; as to any matter of importance, they would have his address at the Bank, and a messenger should call every day at the castle for any message, letter, or telegram she might please to send to him. He would send her his address; but he did not know how long

he might stay in London, where he was going first, as change was what he needed most.

To Sir William he wrote courteously and blandly to the effect that he hoped Sir William would not forget his promise of drawing on the Daneford Bank for the twenty thousand spoken of, and any further sum the baronet might stand in need of. The banker regretted he was obliged to go away so soon after the sad event at the castle; but he was absolutely done up, and rest was the only thing to restore him to vigour. The writer hoped to be back in Daneford in time to say God speed Sir William, on the baronet's setting out for Egypt. While the banker was away, Mr. Matthew Aldridge, manager of the Daneford Bank, would be delighted to do anything in his power for Sir William.

Grey wrote a few lines to Mrs. Grant.

That note was the shortest of the three, and took him the longest time to write. He tore up two copies. Nothing could be simpler or more guileless than the one he sent. It ran :

"DEAR MRS. GRANT,

"I am obliged by my health, to take a few days' rest in a new scene. I hope to be no longer than a week or ten days from home. I hope you will not think absenting myself so soon after Sir Alexander's death shows want of devotion to Sir Alexander's child. My first duty in life is to her. I need not say I leave her with implicit confidence in your care. I know you will always be loyal to the wishes of her father, herself, and yours very faithfully,

"HENRY WALTER GREY."

When these letters had been disposed of and a few other business matters

attended to, he took train for the south-east and arrived in London that night.

The journey fatigued him; and change of air, even when from a good into a worse atmosphere, being beneficial, he slept soundly that night, and awoke with less sense of distraction, less difficulty in collecting his thoughts.

In Grey's youth he had spent much time in London, and knew portions of the town, those west of Tottenham Court Road and Trafalgar Square, very well. But he had little acquaintance with the City, and none with the east. He had been frequently in the City on banking business, and knew the ten streets confluent round the Bank. But the bulk of the City was an unknown land to him.

Change was what he sought. Novelty without solitude. Therefore, instead of the quiet hotel in Jermyn Street, where

he usually put up, he found himself this morning in a large City hotel not a bow-shot from the cathedral of St. Paul.

A while he lay awake listening to the tremulous mutter of the City traffic. What a contrast, these groans of wheels and clatters of hoofs with the morning silence about the Manor House. Here, the walls vibrated, the solid ground shook, the air fluttered against the window-panes with the sway of bodies moving ceaselessly hither and thither. There, no sound came in upon the desert realms of the morning silence but the faint twitter of a bird or the far-off crack of a carter's whip or a sportsman's gun.

Would it not be better for him to stop here always?

Here were no suggestions of the disastrous past. No one knew him here. Suppose he burnt down the Manor House, took twenty thousand pounds out of the

Bank, changed his name, disguised himself, and came to live in the middle of roaring London? Ambition he would abandon. Blows had come so heavily and so quickly, the ambition had been beaten out of him. Security and peace were what he yearned for. Security and peace. Peace.

If he lived in this great whirlpool in the ocean of Man, the shoutings of his fellows would drown the memories of his ears. Who could hear the whisperings of a woman's dress in the tumult of this great city, with its turmoil of multitudinous wheels and clangour of innumerable bells? Here he could take his ease for the rest of his life, and drown the vague hideous whispers of the dead in the loud-toned wrangles of the living.

There was, however, no necessity for his now changing his name or adopting disguises. He had some days to rest and recruit. When these had passed it would

be time enough for him to think of precautions.

He went out after breakfast, and strolled along streets he had never been in before.

He moved west through streets running in perplexing zigzags, a little to the north of Cheapside, Newgate Street, and Holborn. He strolled slowly, looking in at shop-windows, and taking interest in the disputes of ragged boys and the bargaining of slattern women at the doors of slopshops and marine store dealers. He was not used to such scenes, and they took his mind off his own affairs and condition better than the deserted parks or richer streets. It seemed to him as though he had already severed his connection with Daneford, and lived emancipated from the past.

At last he came to an open space, in the centre of which stood a large heavy-looking building he had never seen before. Passing along the southern side of this

open space, he came to the entrance of that building.

He thought: "Often as I have been in London, I have never seen even the outside of this before. It will be a capital place to spend a few hours."

He entered the enclosure through the small gate, and walked slowly up to the deep portico. Under this portico he stood awhile, watching the pigeons, and the people going in and out. Then turning his back upon the daylight, he entered the British Museum, that storehouse for the unclaimed personal property of intestate centuries and forgotten kings.

Passing slowly through the hall of busts, he reached the Egyptian Room. He had no great love of the antique, no great curiosity in people who staggered through the dark approaches leading up to the still, unspiritualised, unexciting Greek art. He never took much interest

in art. He had been many times to the Academy. He had enjoyed going; but it is doubtful if he were offered to be allowed to go through the rooms alone he would have accepted the privilege.

To-day Egypt had a new meaning and a new attraction for him. From Egypt that young man had come unexpectedly to thwart his plans. To Egypt that young man was going back again.

What preposterous and foolish figures those around were! What impossible creatures! Cat-headed men! Was this the kind of country that young man had come from? Alligators, too, and crocodiles! Tombs. The Egyptians gave more honour to their illustrious dead than we do to our living poor. With them a dead lion was much better than a living dog.

Egypt must have been a land of monsters, fools, and tombs.

Grey was now leaning on the rail which protected a sarcophagus of polished black stone. His eyes were fixed vacantly on the coffin.

"The Egyptians," he followed on thinking, "preserved their dead for ever; the Greeks destroyed them at once; and we put them underground, and let them shift for themselves.

"Put them underground—not all!"

He stopped thinking, and looked around cautiously. There were no protecting noises here. Infrequent footsteps, and occasionally a cough, were the only sounds invading the dull gloomy gallery. Coming up towards the sarcophagus by which he stood was a middle-aged portly man, leading two fair flaxen-haired children by the hand. The man was describing the various objects they passed.

"Sometimes we don't let the living shift for themselves, we shift for them; and sometimes without putting the dead in the ground we leave those whom we shifted out of life to shift for themselves unburied."

The man leading the little girls reached the sarcophagus. He stopped the children and, pointing to the coffin, said:

"This was King Pharoah's favourite coffin. When he was quite a young man he contracted the habit of being buried in this coffin, and as he grew older he gave way more and more to this degrading habit. Stop, let me look closer. Upon my word and honour I have made a mistake. I see by one of the mortuary cards issued at the death, and found when they dug up this coffin out of the Nile, the body was that of one Ibis Cheops, who flourished a long time ago. When he was done flourishing they put

him in here. Flourishing long ago was greatly admired; we solicitors are dead against it now. Let me see any of my copying clerks flourishing, and he may take down his hat and overcoat and go and enjoy life."

"Is that in the catalogue, all about this stone hearse?" asked one of the children.

"No, child."

"Then how do you know, uncle? You told us you were never here before."

"My dear child, you forget I am a solicitor; and once a man has anything to do with the Court of Chancery he is up to every mean dodge of human nature. It isn't to say that the muddle-headed ancient Egyptians could deceive or overreach him in any way, but he is more than a match at cheating for the modern Greeks; and that's about as stiff a

competitive examination in roguery as anyone can pass. I beg your pardon, sir; Mr. Grey, I think, of Daneford? Am I right?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE END OF THE HOLIDAY.

Grey looked up with an uneasy start and a sudden pallor.

"You do not remember me. My name is Barraclough. I am London representative of Mr. Evans, your Daneford solicitor."

"Of course, of course. This is about the last place in the world I should think of meeting you, Mr. Barraclough."

"I may say the same of you, Mr. Grey. Indeed few men—none, practically speaking—of our age come here, unless specialists of some kind."

"I have never been here before."

"Nor have I. That fact explains our presence here to-day at our time of life. As a rule, boys are brought here when young, under the impression they are going to have a treat; they find the thing a pedantic stuck-up bore, get disgusted with the place, and swear an oath (most likely the only one they swear and keep) that they will not enter this building again. Ever after in their memory this building seems the sour, old, crusty, maiden aunt of the sights of London. Now, my dears, just walk on a little before us; I want to speak to this gentleman. Mind to keep a sharp look-out for Pharaoh's favourite coffin. I'm sure it's somewhere hereabouts. You'll know it at once by not being able to distinguish it from the others until you shut one eye and keep the other eye fixed on the Rosetta stone, because that is, as you know, the only key we have to the hiero-

glyphics. I think they keep the Rosetta stone in one of the cellars, for fear of the daylight fading the inscription. You shall go down and see it presently; but now run on, and look up the coffin. My nieces, Mr. Grey," he explained, as the children with bewildered gravity walked on. "I live quite close—Bloomsbury Square. My wife had to go somewhere or other to-day, and asked me to take the children out for a few hours; so I left word at the office I should be here if they wanted me. You are not looking quite so well as the last time I saw you."

"I have not been very well of late, and came up here for a rest from business."

"I don't know how you bankers live. If I were one, I should worry myself to death in forty-eight hours. I should always be thinking my clerks were pocketing hundred-pound notes, or burglars were breaking into the strong-box."

Grey winced a little, but said nothing. The other ran on :

"I am sure this meeting is most lucky. Will you dine with me to-day? I got the instructions from Evans this morning, and will do the best I can, you may be sure. I have not, of course, been able to do anything in the matter as yet. It will take time. Dine with me, and we can talk the matter over. We shall be quite alone—no one but my wife. We can exchange views over a cigar."

Grey felt perplexed and confounded. He had not the least idea of what Barraclough referred to. Could it be his head had been so much confused he had gone to Evans, given him important instructions, and then forgotten all about them? The thing must be of consequence. There would be no need to discuss a trifle. It would not, however, do to confess his gnorance or forgetfulness to this man.

"Can we not speak of it here?" Grey asked.

Barraclough looked around, shrugged his shoulders in deprecation of the place, and said: "I think business always comes best after dessert. Do dine with me. I promise you an excellent cigar."

Grey was sorely perplexed. He had no hint of what those instructions were. It was absolutely necessary he should find out. This was not a fitting place for a business chat. The idea of dining with anyone was intolerable.

"I am very much obliged to you, and should be very pleased to dine with you, but I—I really cannot. I must keep as quiet as possible. You will excuse my not going; and, as a favour, tell me now what you have to say."

"Certainly, certainly. Let me see—let me see. Of course, Mr. Grey, in a matter of this kind we must be business-

like, and take into consideration facts we might otherwise leave out of sight."

"Of course."

What could be coming? This was a very grave prelude.

"You are executor and trustee to the will?"

"Yes." Grey started. "Sole executor and trustee."

"Sole executor and trustee! Are you sure of that? Evans said you were one of the executors and trustees."

"I am sole executor and trustee, I assure you."

What had he said to Evans about the will? In his conscious moments he had no intention of saying anything to Evans about the will. The blows were coming too heavily and too quickly. His head—his head!

"Strange! Evans ought to be more careful. He said he was not sure whether

the others were living or not; but he mentioned the fact that it would be necessary to inquire and ascertain if they were living or dead."

The attorney looked cautiously into the sarcophagus, as though he expected the bottom to disappear, disclosing the missing executors and trustees.

Grey glanced at the other man in a bewildered way. The whole of his intellect must be going. Not only had he gone to Evans and given him important instructions about something or other, but, if he was to credit Evans and Barraclough, he had forgotten a feature in that will, and this very feature happened to be enough to destroy him instantly. Could it be, good Heavens, that there was a second name in the will, and he had forgotten it, and was roaming here about London instead of taking the precaution of blowing out his brains!

He felt sick and faint. His head began to swim. What a blessed fate that of those men of Egypt who, three thousand years ago, had died, and been swathed up in bandages, enclosed in huge granite coffins, and buried in the inviolable silence and security of pyramids! Here was he, all naked and raw from crime, out in the rough winds, among the rough ways of unfeeling men; and add to all this his head—his head!

"I am surprised at Evans," said Grey. "He ought to have known. He ought to have known better."

"I should think he ought!" exclaimed the attorney warmly. "To fancy a man instructing another to move in an important matter of this kind, to write and say the consent of the trustees might be relied upon, and then to find out there was but one trustee! Evans must be going mad."

"Yes; he or—I."

"Nonsense," returned Barraclough. "There is no chance of your being wrong. Evans is either careless or mad."

"What do you purpose doing?" asked Grey cautiously.

That question might safely be put in the face of any facts.

"I shall sell, of course. Evans tells me you agree to sell; so that if you are sole executor and trustee, there is no need to look up anyone for consent."

What was he to hear next? This man was telling him he had a co-executor and co-trustee, and that he had authorised Evans to sell. Monstrous! Which was his period of insanity: when he had (if he had) given Evans the instructions, or now? Which was his madness: in giving such instructions, or in now believing his senses and the words of this man? He made a great effort, pulled all his

faculties together, knit his brows, and put this question to himself: "Is the lead to overtake the gold—to-night?" Then he put another question to Barraclough:

"What did Evans say altogether?"

"That Mrs. Grey had come to him——" Arrested by the banker's manner, Barraclough paused.

Grey had leaned suddenly forward, thrust a pale, shrivelled face close to Barraclough's, placed one hand on the attorney's shoulder, and, pointing over his own right shoulder with the other hand, whispered:

"*This one?*"

"You are ill?"

"*No. Go on.*"

"You really look very ill. Let me——"

"*No. Go on.*"

"He said she wished to sell out her annuity of two thousand a year——"

"Who said that?"

"Mrs. Grey, your mother."

"*My mother?*"

"Yes."

Suddenly Grey's face changed. It flushed. He drew himself clear of the attorney, and, throwing his arms aloft, uttered a loud long laugh, followed by the words: "Before high Heaven I thought he meant my wife!"

All eyes were now directed to where the tall banker stood, with his arms upraised, and a smile of joy upon his flushed face. Ere the last echo of his voice had died away among these galleries of relics from the wrecks of a hundred religions, Grey's knees shook, and, with a groan, he fell to the ground.

It was hours before Walter Grey regained consciousness. His thoughts were sluggish and dull. The edges of his ideas were blurred, and wavering this way and that against the background. Around him all

was dim. It was night. A shaded lamp was somewhere in the room. He did not know where the lamp stood.

Where was that lamp? What a strange thing no one came there to tell him where the lamp lay! He himself could not of course get up to try and find out where the lamp was. Of course not.

Why not? Ay, why not? Wasn't it very strange there should be no one there to tell him where the lamp was, particularly as he could not get up!

But why—why—why?

He lost the sense of sight, and felt his eyes pressed against illimitable void darkness. His ears, too, were dead, plugged with thick silence that was not clear, but confused silence, as in the ears of one deep in water. Then the darkness and the silence shuddered with horror, and he ceased to be aware.

It was daylight, and his tongue was very thick—thicker than ever he had felt

it. It was so thick and stiff he could not move it. This was strange. The light, too, was peculiar. It looked as though the dawn or daylight lay far from the window. Of course the dawn was far away from the windows always, but it seemed immeasurably far off this morning. But then the ringing of all those bells made up for the increased distance of the dawn. How dull he had been not to see that at first! Of course the bells more than compensated the distance of the dawn. How he hated Latin! He'd never even try to learn it—never. They might flog him as much as ever they chose, but Latin he'd never learn. Not for all the masters in England. No; not for his father. He would not even pretend to learn it, only for his mother. But for his mother he'd shy a slate at the head-master, and hit the Latin man with the heavy, very heavy knob of the big school-room poker on the bald part, right in

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the middle of the bald part, of his head. They were ringing a thousand bells more now. How the sound did thin out the dawn! It thinned it out until all was worn away. Well, he had better go to sleep. He had a hard day's work before him. He had promised Bee (this very day six weeks they had been married) to take her on the river, their own river, and show her what he could do with the sculls. He was to pull her down to Seacliff. And yet, with that run on the Bank, how was he to sleep? Bee too was worrying him a good deal. Why did they not stop those bells? They had changed the measure of the bells. They had been ringing peals of joy; they now rang ten thousand times more bells, but they were all ringing death-bells. Ah, yes; how stupid he had been! Of course, they were burying the universe in the Great Darkness, and these were the great bells swung in the peaked

hollows of space, ringing for the burial in chaos of the dead stars. Now he must go.

It was afternoon before he again opened his eyes. He felt something had happened, what he did not know. "I have had a bad fall, or an accident of another kind; my head feels queer and I am weak. What has happened? Where am I?"

He lay still awhile to recover strength. Then he asked feebly: "Is there anyone here?"

A nurse showed herself. She would not allow him to speak much, but she told him the history of his present position briefly:

While speaking to Mr. Barraclough in the British Museum, he had had an attack, of what kind the doctor did not say. From the British Museum Mr. Barraclough had him conveyed to this place, the

attorney's house, where he had been insensible for some hours.

Had he raved?

No; not a word.

Had any message been sent home?

Yes. Mr. Barraclough had telegraphed to Mr. Grey's chief man at Daneford, and the gentleman was now waiting below.

Grey asked that Mr. Aldridge might be sent to him. The nurse agreed to admit the manager on an understanding the interview was to occupy no more than a quarter of an hour.

In a few minutes Aldridge entered the room, and having expressed his regrets and hopes, and received suitable replies, Grey's first question was:

"Have you told anyone of the contents of that telegram?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Tell no one on the face of the earth."

"I promise not."

"Aldridge, I have known you some time, and I have every reason to believe and trust you. I am under many obligations to you. Keep this matter entirely to yourself, and you will double all my gratitude."

"Rely on me."

"It may leak out through the telegraph office or through Barraclough. I want you to go back to Daneford at once, see Evans, and tell him not to say anything of my illness. This is most important. Now go. Barraclough may have told Evans. Go at once."

"Any further orders?"

"No."

"I have paid Sir William Midharst's cheque for twenty thousand."

"All right. Don't lose a moment. Don't miss the first train."

Grey fell back exhausted. Though his head ached, it felt clearer than for many weeks.

"It would never do," he thought, "to have all Daneford gossiping over the infirmities of a man who must one of these days be a candidate bridegroom. The least said about me the better. I have neither the humour nor the strength for criticism or sympathy at present."

It was several days before he was well enough to go home. He went back straight to Daneford.

The evening of his arrival he strolled through the city, and took no heed of the direction in which he had wandered until he was attracted by something unusual in a house over the way. The front of the house was all dark. It was his mother's house. The piers of the gate were covered with auction bills

announcing in a few days the sale of the lease and furniture.

He had, until now, forgotten what Barraclough had told him. All rushed in upon his mind.

"She is going to sell her annuity, her lease, her furniture, poor old woman; and I, the only trustee living, cannot prevent her, cannot approach her. Poor old woman! Wat Grey, I never pitied you until this moment."

PART III. HUSBAND AND WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE SECRET OF THE SALE.

Grey had taken all the precautions in his power to prevent a report of his illness spreading, because he did not wish anything to get abroad which might make his approaches to Maud seem unreasonable. That was an important consideration. But it sank into insignificance beside the enormous danger likely to arise from the concentration of public attention upon him at this time.

Here was his own mother, the one owner of remaining claims upon his better

nature, imperilling his fortune—his neck. By advertising this sale, the eyes of all Daneford would be drawn to his mother, and the tongues of Daneford would be busy with his name. He himself did not know why his mother had resolved upon converting all she had in the world into cash, though he had an uneasy suspicion he could guess if he tried. His great dread was that his mother might do some incautious thing, take some incautious measure, in carrying out her design.

Suppose her action did not suggest examination of anything in connection with him, he would still be in a very uncomfortable position. Surely people would speak to him of the step his mother was about to take. What answer should he make? What explanation could he give? If anyone asked him why his mother was selling, he could not tell, for he did not know. It would

soon be found out that, under the simple conditions of his father's will, his authority would be necessary to the sale. How could he justify so unwise an act on the part of his mother? How could he tell people he approved of it? And yet he must say he sanctioned it, otherwise people would think there was something wrong.

But even if he said he sanctioned it, would they not think there was something wrong? People would look first with amazement and then with suspicion at the sale of an old woman's annuity, house and furniture, when he, her childless and only son, was reputed to be enormously rich. What could induce a woman like Mrs. Grey to sell her house in her native town, and the chairs her husband had used, the table at which he had sat, the back drawing-room furniture given her by him as a birthday present after the

coming of their only boy? Clearly nothing but want of money.

It would be known his mother and he had been on most affectionate terms all their lives. Why did not an affectionate son spare an affectionate mother the unpleasantness of a sale by giving her the paltry few thousands? Even if he was mean enough not to make her a present of them, he might advance them upon the security she had to offer. It could not be that mother and son had quarrelled; if that were so he would clearly refuse his assent. It could not be she was in difficulties while her son had money. The clear deduction, the only possible deduction left to the people of Daneford would be that the selling was with his, Wat's, full consent, and that the money was for him —for the Daneford Bank.

All this was quite clear to Grey; beyond it he durst not go. No, he would

not allow his mind to look behind the curtain drawn across the remote future.

What should he do?

All night he lay awake, trying to solve that question. Morning came and found him without a solution.

He had recovered wonderfully. His mind was now clear and vigorous. He resolved not to go to the office this day. He could not face people without some answer to enquiries sure to be made, and he had not yet resolved upon the course he should pursue.

He spent the forenoon reading and writing letters. One he wrote to the Castle to Miss Midharst, announcing his return, and that he should call upon her next day. A second he addressed to his mother in the following terms:

"MOTHER,

"One last word. If you persist in attracting attention to my affairs, by

selling out, the chances are I shall be ruined; and such ruin will be mine that I shall not face it, but leave people to discuss my conduct over my corpse."

He did not sign this note. He sent it by James, the stupid, purblind, discharged soldier, and bade him wait for an answer.

In an hour James returned with the answer. It was in a large envelope, a very large envelope. The reply must have been prepared in anticipation of the appeal. A reply so bulky must be a favourable one. If an adverse answer had to be given, it would be brief.

With trembling hands he broke the seal as soon as he was alone. He drew forth several documents. But the first that caught his eye was the smallest of all—his own letter returned unopened! Upon the envelope was written, in the unsteady hand of his mother, these words:

"Sign the enclosed papers. The signatures must be witnessed. They must be signed and with me before the sale. I have not opened your letter. I daresay it does not lie, but how could I be sure?"

His hand ceased to tremble. He put the unopened letter into his pocket with a firm deliberate hand, calmly took up the legal papers, perused them carefully, critically, and paused now and then to extract the sense from the legal jargon.

When he had finished reading he rang the bell. James answered it.

"James, is there any other man who can read and write about the place, besides you?"

"One of the clerks has just come with a message for you, sir."

"Ask him to step this way, please, and come yourself."

In a few minutes the clerk entered, followed by the servant.

"Glad to see you, Doughty. Got a message for me? Take a seat."

"Yes, sir. A message from Mr. Aldridge. This is it."

"Thank you. I want you, now that you have come so opportunely, to witness my signature to documents of importance. They concern the sale of my mother's annuity and property. I am sole surviving trustee to my father's will, and I am now about to sign these documents, authorising those sales. Stand up, Doughty, and look at me as I sign. James, come near. You are near-sighted. Closer still. Now!"

He signed, and they after him.

"That will do, James. It is exceedingly unlikely there will be any dispute. In case there should, all you have to remember is that I signed these papers in your presence, and you in mine, and in the presence of one another. I am not sure the last is necessary, but never mind. You

need not trouble yourselves to remember all I have said about the matter contained in the papers. You may go now, James."

When the servant had retired he said to the clerk: "Thank you, Doughty. You came very luckily. I will ask you to take these documents back to Mrs. Grey's. Usually such matters reach one through an attorney, but I am sorry to say this is not a very ordinary or pleasant transaction. Leave the documents with Mrs. Grey. There is no answer. Then go back to the Bank, and ask Mr. Aldridge to come to me here this afternoon or evening. I shall not be in town to-morrow, and have something to communicate to him. This is the reply to the note you brought from him."

When the manager of the Daneford Bank arrived at the Manor House he was shown into the presence of the banker.

Grey received him with more of the

old grave blandness than he had displayed for a long time.

"Aldridge," he said, "I am sorry I have a little bad news. It does not concern the Bank. It is worse than that. I wish to Heaven it did concern the Bank. We can bear reverses in business better than home troubles." He paused, with his eyes fixed on the ground, in deep thought.

Aldridge moved his chair closer to Grey's, to show he was giving his best attention. He did not speak.

"You can meet a business difficulty face to face; but you shrink from difficulties or unpleasantnesses which bring the names of those you love and honour into the public mouth."

It was plain to Aldridge Grey was weighing his words with the nicest care. The manager considered it better to preserve his silence still.

"I am going now," pursued Grey, "to place myself upon your honour——"

"I am sure you may do that," interrupted Aldridge with respectful emphasis. The respect in the emphasis was not that of employed to employer, but of sympathiser for a fellow-man, an esteemed fellow-man in trouble.

Something in Aldridge's tone struck Grey. He stood up, stretched out his hand to Aldridge, took the manager's hand in his, and said impressively: "Aldridge, I am sure of that."

"Thank you. Now you may go on. I will not interrupt again."

"You know my mother has advertised her house and furniture for sale?"

"Yes."

"And that she is about to sell her annuity."

"So I have heard."

"I, as trustee, have just signed the

documents. There is talk about this affair in town?"

"There is; a good deal. People cannot understand it."

"It came as a great shock and surprise to me when I heard it. It was that shock knocked me up in London."

"I thought it must have had something to do with it."

"It was the cause of it. Well, I am placed in a horribly awkward position. My mother is called upon to pay a large sum of money, say eight to ten thousand. Of course, we could easily manage that."

"Easily, I should think," said Aldridge, thinking with pride of the gallant stand the Bank had made in the late ruinous times.

"But," continued Grey, "if I paid the money now, I might be called upon to pay a similar or even a larger sum in six

months, and again six months later, and I could not stand that kind of thing."

Aldridge shook his head and looked grave in confirmation of Grey's decision.

"The things must be sold," continued the banker. "When she has no property to pledge, no annuity to pawn, I can make a suitable allowance to her. The fact is, Aldridge, my poor mother has lost all her money in gambling on the Stock Exchange. Her name does not appear. She did it through some fellow in London. Now you see how there is nothing for it but to sell out. You see that clearly?"

"Nothing in the world could be plainer. A woman of her age!"

"Isn't it extraordinary in a woman of her years?"

"Wonderful!"

"Now I told you I threw myself on your honour, and what I want you to do is to keep the matter rigidly to yourself,

except in such cases as you in your judgment think silence would injure the Bank, and then you must not reveal the facts except upon a pledge of strict, the strictest secrecy. No earthly consideration would induce me to allow my poor mother's name to become a byword in Daneford, where she has been respected for so many years. Aldridge, Aldridge, my friend, I count on you to do this for me."

This time it was the manager who stood up. He went to the banker, caught his hand, and said: "You may count upon me in this, Mr. Grey, as upon yourself. I should be the last in the world to make idle talk about the name of Grey, and you may rely upon my keeping the secret from everyone, except when the interest of the Bank is at stake."

"Thank you, my dear Aldridge. It is a great relief to me to have opened my mind to you. You are the only

man whose discretion I could trust in so delicate a matter."

In a little while Aldridge took his leave, and Grey was left alone.

"By Jove," he mused, "that returned letter was a splendid tonic. It pulled me together like magic. I feel a new man now—a new man. Now I have only one person to take care of—myself. She would not hear me. Because I tried to save her the misery I myself endured, because I represented things to her as flourishing when all was gone, she turns on me, throws me off, draws attention to my credit and my reputation when I should have neither if the truth were known, if the lesser truth were known; and by opening up inquiry leading to the discovery of the lesser truth, the disclosure of the greater was risked.

"By Jove, that returned letter was my salvation! She thought she was

treating me as I deserved, severely; all the time she was only nerving me to lace my armour and prepare for the great fight. I can easily provide now against any course she may take short of denunciation, and I don't think she will go so far as that.

"The reason for the sale, as Aldridge has heard it, will be known under pledges of secrecy to-morrow to half-a-dozen of the most important men in Daneford. That will be more than enough to counteract any sinister rumours. The pledge of secrecy extracted from the men whom Aldridge tells will not operate at all, save in making those to whom they give the news very careful as to whom they in turn tell it. Thus it will never come to her ears, even if she stays in Daneford, which I doubt; and thus she will never have an opportunity of denying it."

He got up and walked about. His

elation was great. He swelled out his chest, threw back his shoulders, and allowed his arms to swing at his sides. His thoughts ran on :

"I have been fencing with death, and for the moment I have disarmed my foe. That sale might have ruined me, given me over to the hangman ; I have averted the danger, and turned the attack into a source of security. In a moment of weakness I told her, in a moment of strength I turned the feeble act into a fresh rampart ; for how can I tell, if things went on smoothly, as they had been going (had she not shown the danger-signal at the Consols), I might not, in the weak and pitiful state I then was in, have told her all ? Now a gulf lies between her and me. It is unlikely we shall ever meet again. She had the power of exercising an influence over me which might not be to my safety. I have ensured my future safety by getting away

from the influence of the only person who could make me indiscreetly talkative."

He paused in his walk and drew himself up before the glass. Much of the haggard expression had left his face. He was flushed and handsome-looking as of old. His eyes shone with excitement and the anticipation of triumph.

Once more he strode up and down the room.

"I feel five-and-twenty to-day. Five-and-twenty; not a month older. And though in spirits and health and strength I feel no more than half my age, I am conscious I carry the experience of a second quarter of a century on the shoulders of the first. I could command an army or make love to a school-girl. I shall win yet. I shall win in spite of that lanky nigger, Sir William. I shall win I know, I feel. These muscles are more than a match for his; this head is more than a

match for his; and in spirits I am a long way his junior. I shall win now, for all obstacles are out of my way. She is gone for ever, and she was the last link with—— Bah! the old time is dead. Earth to earth. I am a new man, I say."

In all this he never thought of her as his mother. He always looked upon her as she or her; never as mother. He treated her as if the spirit of his mother had left the body, and the spirit of another, a stranger, had entered in.

That night he slept well, and started early for the Castle the next day.

CHAPTER II.

"SIR WILLIAM——" "NO; MIDHARST."

"THE day after to-morrow I must leave, Maud. I shall have to spend a day or two in London, and then I sail."

He was looking down very gravely at her.

She looked up gravely at him. "I wish you had not to go away."

"So do I, but there is no help for it. I would much rather stay in England and look after affairs here. You never can trust anyone to carry out your plans. You must see the men at work, or they must know you may at any

moment see them. I have planned my own designs and decorations, and tradesmen consider it a point of honour to rob an amateur. They will not do what an amateur tells them, and they are sure to cheat him most liberally. The father of a friend of mine determined upon doing up his house himself. He was not a good man of business like me, but, like me, he knew what he wanted done. He made a rough estimate of what the job would cost him, and when it was finished he found the bills came to about three times his estimate. He got an accountant to look through the bills. The first item the accountant called the attention of my friend's father to was six white marble chimney-pieces for bedrooms at two hundred pounds each. He had told the builder to get three chimney-pieces; there were places in the house for only three of the sort. On investigation the builder

stated six had been got, three having been broken after arrival. 'But,' said the accountant, 'you have not allowed anything for the old ones. What did they fetch?' 'Oh,' said the builder, 'they fell to pieces, and I broke them up.' Subsequently, when going over the newly-built house of a friend, he found two chimney-pieces, one like his old and one like his new ones. 'Where did you get these?' 'Bought them for a dead bargain. Some man, who heard I was building, sold me the old one for thirty-five, and the new one for seventy.' The visitor asked for a description of the seller. It exactly corresponded with the builder. Subsequently it came out that the new chimney-pieces had been kept buried in sand until they could be removed in a cart under a load of straw, and that the old ones had gone out covered with a layer of rubbish!"

"Do you not think, William, that if Mr. Grey would consent to look after the men, such things might be prevented?"

"Yes; I have thought of asking Mr. Grey. But he is such a busy man. He will have, I daresay, a great deal to do on account of your father's will. It would be too much to expect him to spare time for coming down here and looking after a lot of lazy workmen. In fact, it would be out of the question. As to a clerk of works, or anything of that kind, I would not dream of such a thing. They wink at scamped work for a consideration, and order things they do not want. Dear Maud, I weary you with lime-and-mortar matter."

"No, no, no; I like to hear you talk in this way. It is as if—as if——" She paused, unable for the moment to mould her thoughts into words.

"As if what, Maud?"

"As if you liked to talk to me in this way."

Her eyes were fixed on his, his on hers. For a moment neither spoke. Then he said:

"Yes, I do like to talk to you in this familiar business-way. You know we are alone now in the world; and if I don't talk freely to you, to whom else on earth am I?"

"I had a note from Mr. Grey this morning, saying he has returned, and will be here to-day. Had you not better speak to him?"

"I will. That is settled. If he hesitates, I shall not allow him to do it; but I shall try what he will say. Even if he refuses he may be able to suggest some trustworthy person he knows. You see, I have been so short a time in England, and am such an utter stranger here, I know no one."

When Grey came he found the cousins together. Some routine matters having been disposed of, Sir William asked the banker if he would take a stroll with him across the Island, as he wished to speak to him about business.

The banker would be most happy.

Arm-in-arm the two left the Castle-yard, gained the grass, and walked towards the Ferry.

"Mr. Grey," began the young man, "I leave this neighbourhood the day after to-morrow."

"I am sincerely sorry to hear you say so."

"Thank you. Now I am going to try and induce you to let me get even further into your debt——"

"Sir William, it is quite unnecessary for you to say a word with such a view. I told you to draw for any moderate sum you might require, and your cheque would be honoured——"

"I am much obliged to you; but it is not money this time."

Grey bowed. He wondered: "Has he already proposed, and is he going to talk to me about the will? This looks bad."

"You know what rogues there are in the world?"

"I should think I do. I have excellent cause to know of some kinds of rogues," Grey said. He thought: "This is becoming exciting—diverting."

The banker was in the most excellent spirits this morning. He felt like an unruly schoolboy when the holidays come. He was beyond the arm of physical punishment still, and the phase of mental torture in which he had existed for some time had yielded to his present jovial bravado. His old sense of the ridiculous had returned upon him and expelled self-consideration. While he felt profoundly the necessity for precautions, he was careless

as to the means he used, and inclined to estimate nothing as more than a grim joke.

"You see," continued Sir William, "now that I am leaving, I am going to throw myself upon your indulgence and good-nature. You and I have a lot of waiting upon legal forms before we can act officially or authoritatively in the new positions we find ourselves."

"A lot of waiting upon legal forms," assented Grey; and added mentally, "Thank God!"

"But I suppose no one is going to say I am not the right man."

"You may build on that. I daresay"—with a bland humorous smile—"I daresay few have greater interest in disputing your identity (there can be no dispute of your descent) than the representatives of Miss Midharst; and I"—with a bow and deprecating wave of the long arms and white hands—"have no such intention."

"That is all right. Well, now I want to spend the most of that money you were so kind as to advance me on this place"—with a comprehensive sweep of the hand taking in the Castle and all the Island.

"Quite so. I understood that from you before. I do not think you could do better with the money, Sir William."

"I am glad you approve. I not only want your approval, but your co-operation also. Will you help me?"

"To the utmost of my ability."

"I do not intend beginning for a month or so; but as I shall then be away, I shall be unable to ensure the carrying out of my plans unless I can count on the friendly supervision, however slight, of someone who would take an interest in the work of renovation and improvement——"

"And," interrupted the banker with a cordial smile, "you wish to know if I would undertake to see your wishes carried out. Nothing in the world could give me greater pleasure. I do not think you could suggest anything I would more gladly undertake."

"Allow me to explain a little."

"I assure you no explanation is necessary."

"Excuse me, I think it is. It would be the height of impertinence in me to ask you to do anything of the kind, but——"

"But that you know I shall always be only too glad to be of any service to Sir William Midharst."

"You really overwhelm me with your goodness. I feel very much at taking such favours from one who has known me so short a time."

"When people are well met, good-

feeling ripens very quickly. Do you, Sir William, believe in love at first sight?"

"Yes," said the baronet, looking up with an expression of surprise and curiosity. "Why?" he asked, in a tone of perplexity.

"Because," answered the banker, "I believe in friendship at first sight; and, if you will allow me to say so, I took a most friendly interest in you from the first moment I saw you and knew who you were."

"Indeed!" murmured the young man, in a tone of reverie. Then, with a faint smile, he added: "I certainly thought we waited a little time to understand one another."

"I have no doubt it appeared so to you; but I was impressed at the very beginning. You must remember the circumstances under which we met. I

had no idea who you were, and I was then under the impression the full responsibility of Miss Midharst's guardianship lay on me. In her interest I was bound to be cautious. Believe me, my theory of friendship at first sight is quite as true as that of love at first sight."

"It may be—you may be right. I have never considered the question before. I was about to explain a few moments ago that I could not think of asking you to take any trouble in this matter, only I know you will often be here to see Miss Midharst on business, or through kindness; and I thought perhaps you would not consider it too much trouble to watch how these men get on now and then, once a fortnight or so."

"Rely upon it I shall look after them much oftener than that. You may put your mind perfectly at rest, Sir William.

I have some knowledge of things of this kind; a banker meets all sorts of men as customers, and picks up all sorts of odds and ends of knowledge, so that there is scarcely a trade or profession I am not familiar with the roguish side of."

"I must extract one promise from you."

"What is it?"

"That you will not put yourself to any inconvenience in this matter."

"I promise you most unhesitatingly. A little change will do me good, and it will be a most salutary change to come down here now and then and see how things are going on."

"But you really need never come unless you want to see Miss Midharst."

"Quite so."

They separated soon afterwards.

"What luck I have had!" thought

Grey, as he drove towards home. "To think of how that young man played into my hands is most amusing, quite comic. He seemed to divine that I wanted an excuse for being as much at the Castle as possible. What more ample pleas for going than that I have to confer with Miss Midharst over matters connected with her father's will, and have undertaken to overlook the works about to be started by Sir William at the Island? Stop! That thought is worth consideration."

For a few minutes he lay back in the fly perfectly still, profoundly absorbed in thought.

"It's worth doing, and I'll do it," was the concluding link in his thoughts.

"Driver!"

"Yes, sir."

"Back to the Ferry again. I have forgotten something."

"All right, sir."

When he arrived at the Castle he asked for the baronet, and found him at once.

"By the way, Sir William, a matter of no absolute importance, but still of some sentimental value to me, escaped my memory when I was a while ago saying good-bye to you, as I thought, for some months."

"And what was that?"

"You know there is no hurry about Sir Alexander's will?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, nothing need be done about it for months."

"What then?"

"You will be back in a few months, less than six?"

"Let us hope so."

"Well, I shall do nothing about the will until you come back. We can then

put our heads together and see what is best for Miss Midharst's interest."

"I do not fully understand you, Mr. Grey."

"What I intend doing is this," Grey explained: "I am not bound to do anything immediately about the will. I know the will is all right. I will pay the small legacies myself and get rid of them, and when you come back you and I shall go over the whole matter. I shall prove the will and administer to the estate, and then you and I will consult as to what had best be done for Miss Midharst's interests with the money."

"But what is your object in delay?"

"Just a whim."

"I hope, Mr. Grey," said the young man, with warm indignation, "you have not for a moment fancied I do not think you fully capable in every way of acting in this matter?"

"The shadow of such a suspicion never crossed my mind, I assure you, Sir William. But cannot you understand that the position I occupy of common friend to the two who now compose the house of Midharst would make me desirous of having the advice of the head of the house on important matters, such as the disposal of Sir Alexander's fortune?"

The young man looked fixedly, searchingly, at the banker's face for a moment before he answered. When he spoke, he replied with great deliberateness:

"There may be a good deal in what you say."

"You give me your confidence. You leave me to act as your deputy while you are away. You, in a manner, place yourself in my hands; and you are content with me as the guardian of your cousin's

fortune. You rely upon my integrity, upon my honour. I feel the burden I lie under. I should feel less weighed down if you will accept my proposal as a small sign of the esteem I hold you in, and of my simple faith with regard to your cousin's affairs."

The banker held out his hand. He had made his speech in his old and best manner.

The young man caught his hand swiftly, eagerly.

"Grey, I did not hope to find a man like you in you when we met first. I know what stuff you are made of now. We shall be close friends while we live."

"Sir William——"

"No; Midharst."

"Midharst, we shall."

They parted.

When Grey found himself alone

once more, he whispered to the leafless trees:

"Now, Mr. Prompter, ring down the drop. That's a very pretty end of the fourth act."

CHAPTER III.

THE PARTING.

Sir William dined with his cousin that day. He was to say good-bye to her that evening; for, although he did not intend leaving the neighbourhood before the day after next, he had put off some business until the last hour, and had been compelled to give up his remaining day to dry detail and humdrum affairs.

It was only latterly, within the past few days—in fact, since he had come into the neighbourhood of Daneford—he had discovered dry detail and humdrum affairs. Of old details had been to him fascinating, and affairs a passion. When a new subject

came to his hand he devoured it. When a novel situation presented itself, he dashed at it as impetuously as a brave soldier at a breach.

Now all was changed. When he saw the Castle first his impulse was to set men at work on it instantly. He wished to have it put in order at once; and nothing but the appearance of indecent haste deterred him from doing so. To-morrow he had to meet, among others, the people to whom he had entrusted the work, and he wished them all at the bottom of the Weeslade.

"I never knew until now I had such a taste for rural scenery. When I was away I used to think that if I got back to England I should spend all my time in London. Now the 'Warfinger Hotel,' overlooking the broad placid Weeslade, seems to me all I could desire, with now and then a visit to the Island—a stroll

through its grounds and halls alone, or with Cousin Maud.

"How cool and fresh the air is around here! Coming into a place like this out of the great cities of the world is like escaping from a riotous street into a cathedral where a choir is practising hymns.

"I wonder does she sing? I know she loves pansies best of all the flowers.

"But, as I was saying, it is strange how one's most settled ideas change as one grows older. Of course, that is but natural. When I got that pony first I thought all living creatures must admire and envy me. There was only one thing I envied of those around me, and that was their privilege of standing and seeing such a splendid sight as I and my pony going past. I would freely have given all my possessions, except my pony, for the power of admiring on foot at the roadside

the fine spectacle I and my mount made riding by.

"Fancy Sir Alexander not keeping a horse and groom for Maud! He didn't ride of late years, but that is no reason why she should not. She can ride; she told me so. It is too bad to think of the dark seclusion the poor girl has been kept in. I wonder how she lived. Upon my soul it was a shame! There all day long, all the year round, in this gloomy relic of the cold past, with no other change than a few hours in this sleepy place—this humdrum city of Daneford. I am surprised she did not die. It was enough to kill anyone. Fancy passing a whole lifetime away in that old place and this dull town! Monstrous!

"Of course I shouldn't mind it, as I was saying a moment ago, for I have been in the world and seen as much as I want to see. I should feel quite content to

live here always. I should never care for anything better than a bed at the 'Warfinger Hotel,' and a stroll now and then about the Midharsts' old place where the Fleureys once lived, a power in the state. But Maud living here! Monstrous!

"I know what I'll do when I come back—I never thought of that before—I'll get the house in St. James's Square put in order, and she and Mrs. Grant shall go up there, and someone will bring out Maud, and she shall be the beauty of the year. All the town will talk of the lovely Miss Midharst. Then I can go and stay at Warfinger and—and see to improvements, and so on; and then if Maud wanted me she can write or telegraph. I can fill up a telegraph-form with only the word 'Come,' and she can keep it in her purse and send it off the moment she wishes to see me. I'll leave word at the telegraph-office in Daneford, that anyone

bringing me that telegram in half an hour shall have a sovereign.

"I daresay I could have a wire to the Island, so there need be no delay. But it would look strange. I'll make the messenger's fee five pounds, that will be better.

"I shall keep a portmanteau always ready packed, so that there will be no delay after getting the telegram. Even supposing the telegram does not come for a week or fortnight, I may run up to London to see Maud and Mrs. Grant, and make my mind easy about them.

"While they are away I can have alterations made. I can have all the repairs and alterations done while I am in Egypt overhauled and perfected. Maud may like many things changed; and, of course, anything Maud wants to be done shall be done. Of course. Fancy Maud saying she would like something or other

done, and my saying, 'No, Maud; I cannot do that!' Fancy such a thing! I wish she would ask me for something. It is so dull to have nothing to do for Maud.

"Before I knew Maud—it seems a long time, and yet it is only a few days: it is strange to think how long ago my previous life seems—how much time the past ten or a dozen days cover. I have often seen painters, when they had painted-in the solid objects of their pictures, go over parts with thin transparent colour, and, as if by magic, the ruin or the mountain that a moment ago pressed offensively forward retired into its proper place in the composition, and gathered round it mellow repose and forgetfulness. This glaze takes the heat and worry out of the picture. It gives it moist perfume and collected dignity. The few days I have spent here have acted like the glaze

on the substantial background of facts in my past life. Why?

"Why? Never mind why; I am content. I like the collectedness that has come upon me. It cannot arise from the title or the estates. I am leaving all the money behind me, and for all practical purposes the title also. When I go away I shall be nothing more than a Government clerk in the foreign service. When I get there, the few Europeans I know may not have heard of Sir Alexander's death. It is not the title or the money. What has done it?

"Before I knew Maud I always fancied anyone called Maud should be young and fragile and exquisitely fair; and my Maud (she is mine, for are we not of the one house?) is young and fragile and exquisitely fair.

"Maud.

"What a musical name it is! The

lips and ears never tire of it. The oftener you say it the more beautiful it seems. It is a name you must speak softly. You cannot shout it out or fancy yourself saying it angrily. Imagine for a moment my speaking angrily to my Maud!

"Speaking angrily to Maud! The mere supposition is like a blow. Maud is sanctified to me doubly, as being the last daughter of our family, and as being friendless.

"When I go away I shall leave my fortune and my title behind me. Shall I leave anything else? Yes, everything else. Maud.

"If I leave my fortune and my title and Maud behind me, what do I take with me?

"Nothing worth the carriage.

"Bounteous God, I thank Thee with all my heart, and all my soul, and all the faculties of my nature, for having

given love to man, and having given me to love!"

The evening of the day Grey had visited the Island after his return from London, the two cousins sat alone in the little drawing-room after dinner.

"Maud, will you take great care of yourself while I am away?" he asked very earnestly.

She was sitting by a small ebony table in front of the fire. He reclined in an easy-chair at the opposite side of the grate.

She looked up with a childish amused smile, and answered:

"Yes; I will try and take care of myself while you are away. This is a very safe place to live in. No one can get near us without a boat, and everyone knows that a farmer's house would be better for thieves than Island Castle."

"And yet, Maud, though no man

come, something very precious might be stolen by a thief while I am away." He spoke gravely, with that old far-away look in his eyes.

"And who is the thief, and what is the thing?" she asked, with a bright smile.

"Ruffian Death," he answered, for a moment overwhelmed by some dark dread and chilling foreboding.

She grew paler in her black dress; the hand resting on the table seemed whiter than life.

"But, William, I am quite well; I never felt better in all my life; and I think, considering what has lately happened, that is very wonderful." She was anxious, and looked into his face with eyes of grave solicitude.

Still he was following up the chain of his thoughts, and for the moment, unaware, he uttered them:

"There is death in every day, danger in every hour; you must encounter the danger. The way in which you meet the danger decides your relations with death. Life is a series of compromises with death. I wish I were not going away."

"So do I, indeed, William," she said earnestly. "But you must not be uneasy on my part; I am quite well, and shall keep quite well while you are away. I should be most unhappy if I thought you went away uncomfortable on my account."

The tone of the girl's voice brought him back to a consciousness of the situation. His manner changed. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Unhappy about you, Maud! Not I. You must not think that. I was talking generalities; I was not alluding to your case. You see, when a man has been a long time in a foreign country,

where the speech of the people in the streets is unknown to him, and where, among the few people who speak European languages, there are only a couple for whose society he cares, he falls into one bad habit certainly, that of looking at all things in the abstract; and into another bad habit probably, that of muttering aloud to himself. I am afraid I have been treating you to a small example of both vices." He smiled brightly, and held out his hand to her.

She took the small white hand off the ebony table and placed it in his. The brown fingers closed over the white ones, and looking down at the joined hands he said:

"Like the rough brown sheath of the cocoa-nut, and the snow-white fruit within."

"What?"

"My hand round yours."

She said nothing.

He released her hand.

"You will take care of that hand, Maud, while I am away? Some time someone will value that hand more than the regalia in the Tower. It will be to him above all price. He would like to set guards over it as they set guards over the royal jewels, and yet would allow no one to act as sentinel but himself."

Such talk was new to her. She did not say anything.

"We have grown good friends in the few days we have been meeting one another?"

"Oh, yes."

"The best of friends?"

"The best of friends."

"And all the time I am away you will never cease to think of me as your best friend?"

"Never."

It almost made her cry, she could not

tell why, to hear him asking such a question.

"And should you be in any need of aid or advice, you will let me know at once?"

"At once."

There was a pause during which Mrs. Grant entered the room.

The baronet got up, and sitting down beside the widow, said to both the women:

"I had a chat with Mr. Grey to-day apropos of my going, and nothing could have been nicer or more gratifying. He is, without exception, the most straightforward and honourably-minded man I have ever met. He has, Mrs. Grant, not only undertaken to keep his eye on the workmen when they come here, but he has without any hint or suggestion on my part, proposed not to do anything final with Maud's fortune until I return. And, in addition to all this, he will pay all the legacies out of his own pocket and at his own risk.

Maud, I cannot say how grateful I am that you have fallen into such excellent hands. You may place yourself wholly under his direction while I am away. You need not consult me on any subject of business; you will be quite safe with him, and he has a thousand times my knowledge of business."

"Did I not tell you so?" asked Mrs. Grant of Miss Midharst.

"Yes," answered Maud softly.

"What was it?" asked the baronet, turning with a gratified smile towards the widow.

"I told dear Maud long ago that she might have full confidence in Mr. Grey," answered Mrs. Grant, with lively self-satisfaction.

"And you told her what was perfectly true. I must go now. I shall not see you again, Mrs. Grant, until I come back from Egypt. I cannot tell you how happy it

makes me to know how good, how loyal Maud's two friends are—yourself and Mr. Grey."

He had shaken both Maud's hands, and kissed her lips for the first time, and shaken hands with Mrs. Grant, and was gone.

Her cousin William was gone, and she should not see him again for months. What a pity he had to go! When he was by her side, or in Daneford, she felt quite safe; nothing could harm her while he was near. When her father died she had felt alone and cold in the world. She had been susceptible to attack on all sides. She had no confidence in herself; and although Mr. Grey had done everything man could do for her, she owned no claim upon him.

But this cousin, this man of her own family, who, finding her timid and unguarded, sought the privilege of

shielding her from the world and the bleak unknown lying beyond Island Castle —was a new experience, a delightful improvement on the present.

But no sooner had she learned to lean upon his reassuring strength than he must hurry away. What a pity!

Her cousin William would come back, no doubt; but Egypt was far off, very far off, and the power of his protection was reduced greatly by distance.

Why should she think she would need protection of any kind? Surely Mrs. Grant and Mr. Grey were protection enough in a quiet well-ordered place like Daneford and its neighbourhood?

Yes; but Cousin William had been more than a protector; he had been a companion as well, and there was something in his talk and manner neither Mrs. Grant nor Mr. Grey possessed. She was always content with what Mrs. Grant

said, or what Mr. Grey said. Their words always exhausted the topic; but when he had spoken she felt led on to wonder what lay behind and beyond what he had said.

She had told Mrs. Grant truly he had interested her; and although he always had spoken to her as though there could be no question of the supremacy of his will over hers, she liked that.

When Mrs. Grant told her to do a certain thing, the doing of it was dry and uninteresting. When Cousin William had told her to do a thing, she always did it with the sound of his voice in her ears; or she had thought what mystery of Egypt he had before his eyes when he gave her the command; or she had tried to fathom his mind as to the manner in which he would best like to see the thing done.

But now all was cold and monotonous and dull. Really the place had got so quiet

of late that she found her chief delight in her old books of Egypt, and in the geography of that country, and in following on the map the overland route he had taken to Africa.

CHAPTER IV.

BETWEEN THE LIGHTS.

The day Henry Walter Grey bade good-bye to the young baronet he went home to the Manor House in the best spirits.

That latest stroke of his had proved marvellously successful. In fact, the result completely astonished him. Sir William, had been civil, polite, conciliatory to him up to that last interview. During it the young man had thrown aside all reserve and rushed into his arms with enthusiasm. This young man, of whom he had stood in dread a few days ago, had been not only neutralised, but converted into a friend.

And at what cost? The voluntary

promise that he, Grey, would take no steps about the will until the return of the head of the house. What a transcendent joke! There was nothing like it on the stage. Nothing approaching it. He had won the young man by undertaking not to invest money already stolen and made away with!

And how had he done it? Not by worrying and sneaking and shivering and anticipating all kinds of evils; not by thinking and attending to his own fears and hopes connected with matters which had been done and could not be undone. No; but by thinking of what other people might do adverse to him, and trying to out-manœuvre them. The general who, upon hearing the enemy is advancing, does nothing but contemplate the horrors of defeat, will inevitably be defeated. It is with matters of business as with a general in the field—to provide against nothing

but defeat is to ensure defeat and final disaster. To dread a disease is to open the door for its reception.

Away then for ever with doubts and fears! He was still a player in the game. It was a game of skill, and he must win. The way to win is never to think of yourself or of the result of winning or losing, but to concentrate every human faculty upon the game itself, and the plans for effecting the defeat of your opponents.

And now how did his great game stand? Let him see.

Sir William Midharst would be away in Egypt some while, some months, say three to four months, during which time it was necessary to win, by any means he could employ, this girl Maud. He was the guardian of her fortune and the superintendent of works about to be carried on at the Castle. This gave him not an

excuse so much as a command to be frequently there. Thus he should have excellent opportunities of pressing his suit. He was to consult Miss Midharst upon alterations, *et cetera;* and that supplied the means of obtaining frequent and long interviews with her in which they should often be alone. Good, very good!

He felt strong and healthy and capable. His illness had cleared away the confusion which had been gathering round him; he slept better of nights, and awoke cheerful.

He knew he should be able to interest Maud, and to interest a woman is to win her. Those solemn, lank, poetical men, like the new baronet, took such a time to make up their minds, that a man of sanguine temperament like himself won a woman before one like Sir William determined on the first sigh. Girls don't like sighs; they prefer laughter. Good!

The Bank was all right now, and when

he had married Maud there was no one to come and pry into matters. Every one would think by his marriage with her he had acquired upwards of half a million; and for a man in his position to have the reputation of riches is almost as good as to have riches. Splendid!

He had provided against injury arising out of that sale of the lease and furniture and annuity. He had not been in a position to resist his mother. He knew that, having made up her mind to sell, she would sell, no matter what it cost her feelings. She would threaten to denounce him rather than be baulked in doing what he supposed she intended with the money. He did not think she would have gone the length of denouncing him. She had done worse. She had shown herself indifferent to anything he might have to say. She could not know but that letter of his told her he had

paid back all the money, or that it contained a plea for a short respite. She had not cared what happened to him; and he—he had taken means to protect himself. He did not feel angry with her in the least. He had simply cut her off from his mind. There was no such person any longer. That returned letter informed him of her death. Those documents he had signed for her were announcements of her decease. That auction bell would ring for the interment of the past and the future which had of late given him trouble. With her went everything he loved. He was alone now, face to face with his fate, and free from any unmanning influence or depressing considerations. This was best of all!

As to the other and greater danger, that was scarcely worth counting. So far there had not been the shadow of menace. Farleg had, no doubt, got out of the

country, and was now settled with his wife somewhere out West. No reason existed for supposing Farleg would betray him; for he had taken hush-money, and no reward had been offered, as nothing had been suspected. No; he need not fear that source. Only one thing remained to be done. He had shaken off those superstitious terrors which had haunted him for a while. He was still menaced by the cancelled pages in London; that was the only danger ahead. All his energy for the future should be directed towards avoiding the consequences of his theft.

The day Sir William left Daneford Grey spent at the Bank. His private correspondence and such account-books as he himself kept, to which no one but himself had access, were in arrears, and had to be brought up to the current day. He had to give a long audience to Mr. Aldridge, and several merchants wanted to see him,

so that the hours were fully occupied, and when he got home he felt tired; it was dark, and he resolved not to go to the Island until the early part of the next afternoon.

When next day he got to the Castle, he found Mrs. Grant in the great hall about to go out.

"I am lucky to meet you, Mrs. Grant. If you are not in a great hurry I should like a few words with you."

"Certainly, Mr. Grey; I shall be most happy. I am going to town for a few things Miss Midharst and myself want. I have not been out since poor Sir Alexander's death; but I'm in no hurry."

They were now in the open air.

"I hope Miss Midharst is quite well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"And not pining after her handsome cousin?" with a gay smile.

"Handsome! Do you too think him handsome?"

"Yes. But who else thinks him good-looking?" with a still brighter smile.

"Miss Midharst says he is one of the handsomest men she ever saw."

"Upon my word I am inclined to believe with her." This was accompanied by the brightest smile of all. "It is useful to know what she thinks of her cousin's appearance," thought Grey gravely.

"Well, Mr. Grey, I can see nothing handsome about him. I like an Englishman to look like an Englishman; but I forgive him his looks because of his good behaviour. Nothing could have been better than his conduct from first to last. He makes Miss Midharst stay here; he promises to do up the Castle and grounds; and last of all, Mr. Grey, he speaks of you before he goes away in words which do him credit."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Nothing could have been more manly than the way he spoke his mind to Miss Midharst and myself about you the other evening, the last day you were here. I don't think he liked you at first; but he made up for that at last. Nothing could be better than what he said."

"I am glad to find he does not misunderstand me." These were two useful and significant facts: that Maud thought her cousin good-looking, and that her cousin had been favourably impressed by him. "Mrs. Grant," he said, after a pause, "you said you were going to town to buy some things for yourself and Miss Midharst."

"Yes."

"Will you have the goodness to put this parcel in your purse? It is what you are entitled to under the will of Sir Alexander."

He held out his hand to her with a bundle of notes.

"I really don't want it now, Mr. Grey," she said, remembering what Sir William had told her.

They had already reached the Ferry-slip. He held out his hand to her. She held out the notes to him. He smiled, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"Give me your hand only. I want to help you into the boat. Put that bundle in your pocket. I hope you do not think I want it."

He handed her into the boat, raised his hat, and, when the ferryman had pulled a dozen strokes from the slip, raised his hat again and turned towards the Castle.

As he walked he thought: "That is not the worst investment I ever made. Prompt payment and attention go a long

way with women who are no longer young. Now for a woman who is young and charming."

"What an agreeable man Sir William is!" said Grey, when he had been some time seated with Maud. "So affable, good-natured, and amusing. He is one of the most pleasant young men I ever met."

"I am glad you like him," said Maud, a little surprised.

"Like him! Of course I do. He is a man after my own heart. So open-minded and full of go, of animal spirits. You very seldom find a man who has been long out of Europe retain his animal spirits. The inhabitants of Asia and Africa are always afraid of sunstroke or snakes, tigers or tyrants. In the tropics no one ever makes a joke. Life is always serious there. Who ever heard of an Eastern Joe Miller? No; they have

proverbs and poetry, but no jokes. When you are always expecting to find a snake coiled round the leg of the table, or an official waiting outside the door with a drawn sword to cut off your head, you are afraid to laugh. Now what I admire most in Sir William is that, although he has been long in Africa, he has kept his animal spirits unimpaired. Isn't it a great blessing?"

"Yes," answered Maud, in amazement.

"I know it is not what very straitlaced people would like, but the views he holds of all serious things are most diverting. I am very sorry I had to go away while he was here. It is such a privilege to meet a man like him—a man of the world who knows everything, and can laugh at the weaknesses and follies of the world, under which heads of weaknesses and follies he classes much of what smug respectability calls the Generous and Noble Aspirations of

Men. I will not say I hold his views, but I hold my sides when he tells them. Did you hear any of his stories?"

"No, Mr. Grey," answered Maud, ready to cry. Was there really this other, this light and frivolous side to her cousin's character? She could hardly believe it. Yet here was Mr. Grey telling her about it, and no one could think of doubting Mr. Grey's word.

"Ah! Quite so. Yes. It is likely he thought you might not care for them. They might seem profane to you. I have been most unwise. I felt sure he had told them to you. He might be displeased with me if he knew I had mentioned them to you. Will you promise not to allude to them when you speak or write to him? I daresay he will write to you, and you will write to him."

"He promised to write, and I promised to write to him."

What a revelation was in the banker's words! Could it be her cousin had two sides? If it was so, where did the insincerity end? This was a miserable discovery after she had lifted him up in her mind as a perfect model of what a man should be.

"Of course you will write to your guardian and your only cousin; but mind you are not to say anything about what I have been saying to you. I should not mind speaking of it to him in your presence, but a thing of that kind in black and white looks very bad. Have you heard from him yet?"

"Yes; I got a note saying he was about to set off. It was written yesterday."

Her face looked wan and weary. It

was disenchanting to hear all this of Cousin William. How could it be?

"A bad sign. A very bad sign," thought the banker. "But we must be a match for him. We must be a match for him. No precaution shall be neglected." Then he said aloud: "I shall be very often at the Castle now; for not only shall I have to come and see you, but I am also to look after the workmen for Sir William, so that I fear you will have to make up your mind to endure a great deal of me."

"I shall be very glad to see you every day. But I think you are doing too much for me—for us."

"Miss Midharst, you must understand once for all that there is absolutely nothing in my power I am not anxious to do for you personally."

He said this with great emphasis and precision, raising his right hand slightly

towards the ceiling while he spoke, as though calling Heaven to witness his words.

She did not know what to say. There was an earnestness in his manner forbidding commonplace thanks.

His face suddenly lightened.

"I was about to say that either I or a messenger from the Bank will be here every day, and whoever comes can take any orders you and Mrs. Grant may have for town. This will save Michael's going in so often. I will get you a letter-bag. You shall keep one key and I the other, so there will be no danger of letters getting lost. In old times Michael was, of course, as safe as the post; but now we shall have comparative strangers—clerks and so on—whose honesty has not been so well tried as Michael's.

Soon he took his leave. Next day he did not call, but a clerk came with a letter-

bag and a key. There was nothing in the bag. Miss Midharst had no letters. One from Mrs. Grant went back to town. That was all.

When the clerk got to the Bank, he handed the bag to the banker. The banker opened it, glanced at the one letter it contained, smiled, put Mrs. Grant's among his own letters for post, and whispered to himself: "Everything is fair in love and war. If this had been Maud's, I should have had just one peep."

Now he began to visit the Castle almost daily. The men had not yet been set to work, but already the furniture makers and upholsterers were busy in the workshops. Hangings had been ordered at Paris; designers were carrying out plans for restoring the great banqueting-hall to its olden splendour; brass-founders were casting fittings; and gardeners had

inspected the grounds with a view to ascertaining their capabilities.

At first Grey made it a point not to see Maud every time he called. By the end of a month he was at the Island six days out of the seven, and never left without seeing her.

During that month she had twice written to her cousin. He had carried the letters from her to the Bank, and there opened and read them. He closed them and sent them on. There had been nothing particular in either, beyond copious praise of Grey's great kindness to her, and his ceaseless attention to the business of her cousin.

So far all went well. He continued in good spirits, and the people of Daneford said he had never looked better or seemed gayer.

His mother's place had been sold out, and she had gone he knew not whither.

"That is all the better," he thought. "The stage is clearer, and nothing remains to distract my attention from the main thing."

He had been very cautious in his interviews with Maud. He had said or done nothing which could give her a hint of his aim. He had been good-humouredly and sedulously careful to do all she wished as she wished it done. He had taken her and Mrs. Grant for drives in quiet country places, where the freshness of their mourning would be free from observation and remark. On these occasions, although Maud occupied the seat of honour, he was more attentive to her companion.

But the time for winning had a limit, and at the end of the first month he gradually changed his manner.

When they met he gazed into her eyes longer and with more interest than

of yore. He pressed her hand more warmly, and retained it longer. His voice, when he spoke to her, was lower and softer. His solicitude for her health gained daily, and when they walked out into the grounds together, he chose for her the easiest ways, and showed his anxiety that her feet should not touch the wet grass, or the ragged brambles her face or figure.

He prolonged his visits. He always found an excuse for getting her out into the grounds, or into some room where for a time they might be alone. When parting from her, he would say, if no one was by:

"I am sorry I must leave now. I am sorry I am obliged to go back to Daneford and that lonely Manor. I wish I could stay here."

And she would say:

"I am sure, if you will stay, Mrs.

Grant will make you comfortable. But you lose too much time for us."

He would answer:

"No. Oh no, dear Miss Midharst. The only pleasant time I have now is when I am here, in your society, trying to make this place better for you."

Then he would say good-bye impressively, and move off with a dejected look, and turn round, when he had taken a few paces, and wave his hand to her in a way that said: "Do not grieve because I am sad. I am nobody."

This manner set the girl pondering, and she said to the widow one day:

"Mrs. Grant, I think living all alone in that house, where his wife was once, is bad for Mr. Grey."

"There is no doubt of it, my child. It will kill him, I am sure. He ought to marry again soon."

"Marry again soon!" cried the girl

in surprise. The idea that he might marry again had never suggested itself to her mind, and it seemed very wonderful.

"Yes, my dear. He's a young man. A much younger man than many men of thirty."

"I know he is very amusing, but I had never before thought of Mr. Grey marrying again."

To Maud the idea was not only novel, but a little shocking at first. She had been in the habit of classing him with her father. Now for the first time she had come to think of him as a man who was not only not nearly so old as her father, but relatively young.

All at once the recent change in his manner towards her struck her, and, little as had been her experience of the world, or her knowledge of its ways, she could not but see a desire on Mr. Grey's part to be particularly agreeable to her. This,

coupled with the fact that she could no longer regard him as a man the events of whose life were merely awaiting the final audit to be posted into the eternal ledger, made her feel an awakened interest in him. He was a new man, an individuality hitherto unexplored.

Another thing struck her at the same time.

Her cousin, whom she had taken as a grave, serious-minded, chivalric soul, turned out to have two sides to his character. When not with her, he could be light, trivial, profane.

The banker also had two sides to his character. He was robust, honest, jovial, in general. But at home sorrow and loneliness were eating him away in the house where once he had been happy with the wife so suddenly taken from his side.

What a strange discovery! Were all men who were not as old as her father

double-sided like these? She should not like to ask even Mrs. Grant that question. Then what a contrast did these two men afford: the one assuming or wearing naturally towards her the manner of earnest collectedness, while towards others he showed questionable levity; the other showing her a steady brightness, while in reality his heart was consumed by a great sorrow! Were all men like these? How wonderful it seemed!

The contrast revealed to her by these two men first aroused Maud Midharst to perceive men's minds and ways differed widely from the minds and ways of women. Of old she had known men were stronger than women, had greater capacity for affairs, more knowledge of the world and more wisdom. Until now she had never reached the fact that there were in the minds of men faculties differing from those of women, not only in quality and inten-

sity, but also in kind. Instantly her wonder at the superiority of men left her She no longer felt astonished at disparity between mental faculties common to men and women. She suddenly awakened to a curiosity never felt before. She was now interested in all things which enabled her to discover where the thoughts of men differed from the thoughts of women.

When she had heard her cousin speak on the day her father was buried, she had felt surprise and interest. What he said had given her a pleasant shock. Now she had gone a post farther on the great road of life. She had learned to speculate.

CHAPTER V.

"A WOMAN OF NO NAME."

One day when Maud was sitting alone in the library by the fire reading, a servant entered with word a lady who declined giving any name wished to see Miss Midharst. She was, the servant said, a thin, tall, old lady, dressed in black.

No ladies called at the Castle. What could this woman want? Maud wondered. Who could she be? A tall, thin, old lady, dressed in black. Had she asked by name for Miss Midharst?

"Yes; she said she wanted to see Miss Midharst. I asked her would Mrs. Grant

do, and she said No, she wanted to see Miss Midharst alone."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

Who could it be? The last person who had asked to see her and declined to give a name was William. (She would write to William to-day and tell him what she thought. It was a strange thing for her to have to write to him. But she did not know what to do. William was her only friend. She was afraid to speak to Mrs. Grant about it. If she mentioned the matter to Mrs. Grant, no one could tell but it might get back to Mr. Grey's ears, and that would never do. Never.) Ah, the servant is waiting yet.

"Where is the lady?"

"In the hall-room, madame."

"Tell her I will come to her at once."

Maud rose slowly and put down her

book. As she moved along the corridors, she thought :

" This is most unpleasant, it is terrible. My father is not yet two months dead, and Mr. Grey's manner frightens me. At first I did not notice it, but now—now I can have no doubt. He has not said anything plain yet, but he can mean nothing else. He calls me Maud, and not Miss Midharst. He takes my hand, too, when we are alone, and looks in my eyes and frightens me. His eyes are queer. When he is looking at me he seems suddenly to forget who I am, or where he is. It is only within the past week I noticed this ; and yesterday he looked at me with those awful eyes, and begged me to be good to him and come, for God's sake, and take the thing away from the dark passages and the doorways. Then he asked me if I smelt blood, and burst out laughing, and said all this was part of a play he was writing. Judas Iscariot, the

hero of his play! What a horrible thought!"

She reached the hall-room. It had long ago been used by the family as a breakfast-parlour when few guests were at the Castle; for many years it had been made a waiting-room.

Maud opened the door and entered. The day was cold, and she directed her glance first towards the fire. No one was there, but she saw standing with her back to the window a tall, thin, old woman.

The stranger did not move. She fixed her eyes on Maud, and stood staring at the girl.

Maud moved slowly and timidly up the room. When within a couple of yards of the other she said:

"I am Miss Midharst. You wish to see me. Will you not take a chair near the fire?"

"Yes, I wanted to see you. I want to see you."

She did not move. Her voice was firm and hard, with a tone of menace in it.

"I—I cannot recall your face, and the servant did not bring your name."

"We never met before. The servant did not bring you any name, for I have none. I am a woman of no name."

"A woman with no name!" cried Maud, with a feeble attempt at a smile. There was no provocation for smiles in the words or manner of the unknown, and Maud felt uneasy.

"Yes; I once had an honourable name, and was connected with honourable people who bore it. But that name was dishonoured by one who owned it, and the name died. My name would not live dishonoured." The voice was firm and hard still, and the original pose unbroken.

"I am sorry for that," murmured

Maud, not knowing anything else to say. What a contrast between this unknown visitor and the former! And yet, although a strong contrast appeared, there was a subtler similarity.

"And I am sorry for you."

Maud started and repeated: "Sorry for me! Why are you sorry for me?"

"Because you are young. I used once, until lately, to think it a privilege to be young; now I consider it a privilege to be very old or dead."

Maud felt more and more uncomfortable. This was not a cheerful way of looking at things. Maud had quite enough unpleasant matters to occupy her mind, and she was quite unstrung. What business had this woman with her? She would try. She spoke somewhat tremulously:

"Can I be of any use to you?"

"No. Nor can I be of much to you."

"To me!" said Maud in surprise. "I

hope no one has been asking you to do anything unreasonable for me. Of course, as I did not know you until now, and never heard your name, you will excuse my not thanking you for what you may have done for me."

"I have done nothing for you but evil."

"Evil! I assure you you must be mistaken. No one has done me harm, as far as I know."

"But there may be evil you do not know of, and I may have been the innocent cause of it."

"But if you were innocent you must not trouble yourself about it; and besides, whatever the harm was, it has not hurt me, so that you must make your mind easy."

"The evil may be done, and yet unfelt, and may be felt later on, and the evil may not be done yet."

"I do not clearly understand you."

"I do not intend you should. I do not know why I have spoken so much. I cannot say more. I have merely called to deliver into your hands a parcel of some consequence. The contents of this parcel is yours. I said I cannot do much for you. I can do no more than give you this. You must promise me not to open this parcel until to-morrow morning. You need not be afraid of it. The things in it are good things. You promise?" The woman held out her hand with a small parcel in it.

"Yes," answered Maud, taking the parcel.

At that moment the door opened, and a voice said:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Midharst; I did not know there was anyone here."

Maud turned round, and saw Henry Walter Grey smiling and bowing in the

doorway. With the handle of the door still in his hand, he took a backward step, when the old woman said:

"Come in. I have finished with Miss Midharst.

At the sound of the voice Grey sprang back a step, thrust his head forward, and uttered a low cry of surprise and pain.

Maud moved towards him, saying:

"Are you ill, Mr. Grey? Are you ill?"

His face was shrivelled and his mouth hung open.

Before Maud could take another step the hand of the old woman was on her shoulder, and the voice of the old woman was in her ear, firm and hard as before:

"Remember your promise! Good-bye."

With erect head, bright eyes, and a quick step, the stranger walked to the door, on the outside of which Grey stood paralysed. He bowed and groaned

as she approached, and as she passed him he crouched against the wall.

She swept by him without looking at him, turned the corner of the corridor and passed out of sight.

Maud, transfixed with amazement, stood where the old woman had arrested her.

When the stranger had disappeared, Grey made a prodigious effort, shook himself, assumed a sickly smile, and straightened his figure.

The action of the banker dissolved the stupefaction of the girl, and she moved rapidly towards the door to escape. Just as she reached it the manner of the man suddenly changed. His face became dark and threatening, and he bounded into the doorway, barring the exit and crying:

"Stop! I must speak with you before you leave the room!"

The girl recoiled in terror, and began

with "Mr. Grey!" in a tone of fear and expostulation.

"Go back. I say I *must* speak with you before you leave this room!"

She struggled with herself for a moment, and then summoned courage enough to begin with:

"By what right, Mr. Grey——"

"By any right or by any wrong you must speak with me. Do I look like a child, or a fool, or a woman?"

His manner was vehement and overpowering. For an instant she resolved to defy him, but by a powerful sweep of his arm he indicated that denial was out of the question. With a palpitating heart and confused head she stepped back into the room.

He followed her and locked the door. When she heard him do this her strength gave way altogether, and she sank on a chair.

He walked up and down the room some time before he spoke.

"Tell me, what did that wretched woman say to you? What was her business with you? What brought her here?"

"She told me she had wronged me innocently."

"How?"

"She would not say."

"What do you mean, girl? Do you dare to tell me she said she had wronged you and did not tell you how?" He drew up in front of her chair.

"Yes."

"Is that a lie?"

"Is what a lie?"

"Have you, girl, told me a lie?"

"Mr. Grey, I——"

"Girl, I will have no pretty sentiments! I am talking business now. Such business as you never even heard of. You may

not know the results hanging on your words. Did that wretched woman tell you the injuries she had done you?"

"She did not." Maud felt she should faint.

"Listen to me now, girl: this is business. Attach ten thousand times more value to the answers you are going to make me than to any other answers you gave in all your life. My question is: What names did she mention?"

"None. She mentioned no name."

"Absolutely and literally no name?"

"She mentioned no name."

"Not even her own?"

"Not even her own."

"But you know, of course, who she is?"

"I never saw her before. I do not know who she is."

"The servants know her name."

"Jordan told me a lady wished to

see me in private. He did not know her name."

"Are you sure of all this?"

"Yes."

"What was her business with you?"

"She left me that packet on the table."

"Did she say nothing about it?"

"That it contained something of mine, and that I was not to open it until to-morrow morning."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Swear it to me."

"Mr. Grey!"

"I know; but swear all the same."

"I will not."

"Then you have been lying."

"I have not. How dare you say such a thing, Mr. Grey!"

"Well, there, Maud, dear Maud, let us drop the comedy. I am afraid I have

carried it too far already. You know really who the poor creature is?"

"I have told you I do not."

"She is a harmless old woman who is mad on religion, and goes about doing this kind of thing, and leaving bundles of tracts like this." He took up the parcel off the table. "She must not be allowed in here again. I will give orders that she shall not be admitted. And now can you guess the reason for my comedy?"

"I cannot."

"It was, dear Maud, because I heard to-day there is some chance of the will being disputed, and I wanted to try how you would go through the ordeal of a severe cross-examination. And I must say, anything to equal my Maud's admirable coolness I never saw. You did not for a moment fancy I was in earnest?"

"I don't know what I thought. I was greatly frightened."

"Well, I admit I did go too far. But it was in your own interest, dear Maud—in your own interest. You are all right again, dear Maud?"

He took her hand in his.

"I feel a little nervous and hysterical. Please open the door and let me go."

"Certainly; it was carrying the joke too far to lock the door; but I was borne away by the spirit of the thing. You will forgive me."

"Oh, yes."

"Well, dear Maud, good-bye now. You are leaving your parcel of tracts behind you. Never mind; I'll read them for you."

When she had left the room he took up the parcel, dropped it into his pocket, and started at once for the city.

That day Maud wrote to her cousin,

Sir William Midharst. The concluding paragraph of her letter ran thus :

"I do not know what is the matter with Mr. Grey ; his manner terrifies me. If you can, come back at once."

CHAPTER VI.

PENNILESS.

As Grey drove home he thought: "Was ever man so lucky as I! She did not denounce me. She did not give her name. She did not mention mine. She did not tell the nature of the injury she had been the innocent cause of, and I was in time to prevent surprise being aroused by the contents of that packet. Was ever man so lucky as I!

"I think I half convinced Maud the scene between her and me was a rehearsal. If I have not, I am sure to be able to do so later on. Maud had no suspicion that woman was my mother; and if she had

she could in no way trace my manner to the presence of my mother. Even if she discovers later on it was my mother, I shall be able to find out some back door, some means of escape. It is time enough to say good-day to the devil when you meet him; so I will not waste time in providing for what may never arise.

"This parcel is money, of course. It is a large slice out of the sales of the annuity, house, and furniture. I don't know what the gross sum was, but I should not be surprised if she left half of it with Maud. Let me see."

He cut the cord, and opened out the parcel. There were two or three folds of brown paper; then came a bundle of notes, and in the middle one note doubled up, and in this innermost note four sovereigns, seven shillings, and a fourpenny-piece. There were seven one thousand pound notes, three one hundred, and eight

tens, making seven thousand three hundred and eighty pounds in notes, and four pounds seven shillings and fourpence in coin; in all, seven thousand three hundred and eighty-four pounds, seven shillings and fourpence.

Grey knit his brows, counted the money over again, twisted the gold and silver inquisitively through his fingers, and uttered an exclamation of dissatisfaction.

"Of course," he thought, "they could have traced these notes to her as easily as though her name was written on the back of each. I can now cut off their history as long as I like. I cannot understand how she got so much for the lot. Double this would be a thing far above my estimate. At the very outside I don't think the three things were worth more than ten thousand. It might have gone to eleven thousand. I should not have

thought so much, certainly not a penny more. This would be about two-thirds of eleven thousand—a trifle more than two-thirds. Can this woman have given Maud two-thirds of what the property brought, and left herself with short of four thousand pounds, when she may live ten or a dozen years yet? Monstrous!

"My mother, upwards of seventy years of age, with a bankrupt son and four thousand pounds—a hundred and fifty pounds a year! Monstrous! I'll go to Evans and find out the facts of the case, and relieve myself of this heavy suspicion."

He drove to Evans's. The solicitor was in an outer office among his clerks. Grey was too impatient to wait until they could reach the private room, and too cautious to allow Evans to answer his question aloud. He took up a sheet of paper and wrote on it:

"What were the net proceeds of my mother's sale?"

He handed this to Evans.

The solicitor wrote some figures, and returned the paper to Grey.

The banker turned down the side of paper with the figures, and went to the window. With his back to the attorney and clerks he read the figures. The paper fell from his hand. He raised his face against the thin winter light. He folded his arms tightly across his chest. A convulsive movement began at the shoulders and descended throughout his body. He swayed to and fro violently.

Evans raised his head, and saw something was wrong. He stole softly behind the banker, and placed his hand on the other's arm.

"Come this way. Come to my private room," whispered the solicitor gently.

Grey moved away mechanically. Even with the attorney's assistance he walked unsteadily.

When he had reached the private room Evans pressed Grey into a chair, locked the door, and said:

"Rest a while. Rest a while, and then tell me."

Grey rose to his feet laboriously, as if his joints were frozen. He placed a hand on each shoulder of Evans, and said, in a heavy husky voice:

"Evans — my God! Evans — do you know what has happened?"

"No."

"My mother, upwards of seventy years of age, has left Daneford and gone I don't know where; and she has not a roof to cover her, a meal to eat, or a shilling in her pocket."

The sum Evans had written on that piece of paper was seven thousand three

hundred and eighty-four pounds, seven shillings and fourpence.

"Evans, she hasn't kept a copper. By this time she may be without a shilling."

Half an hour elapsed before Grey found himself able to command himself sufficiently to face the public eye.

Evans offered to do anything in his power. He undertook to find Mrs. Grey and ascertain her condition; but Grey refused all help. He felt perfectly convinced his mother would allow nothing to be done for her by him. If she beggared herself to pay some of the stolen money, it was not likely she would accept money from him who had committed the theft.

When he left Evans's office he walked slowly and sadly towards the Bank. It was now dusk. He went to his private-room, and, flinging himself into a chair, sat long gazing at the fire.

He had, he had fancied, banished all

thought of his mother from his mind for ever. He had flattered himself he had cast off all his old affection, so that it might be no longer a stumbling-stone in the path of his ambition. But this horrible discovery of the old woman's absolute destitution could not be resisted.

His mother a homeless wanderer among strange people in the winter time! Unendurable thought! She to whom he had looked up with love and reverence all his life, who had soothed and cheered him in the little griefs of his boyhood and the trials of his manhood, now without a fireside of her own!

He had himself never known what poverty, actual poverty, was; but he had heard and read of it, and had come in contact with it as a man connected with the treasurership held by him. There were people in the world at this moment who were hungry and had not a penny

to buy bread. Had not a penny such as this.

He had taken a coin out of his pocket, and now held it in his left hand. He was bent forward; his right elbow rested on his knee; his head drooped over the left palm, in which lay the coin.

People who starved for want of such a coin as this! Under privation it was the children and the old people succumbed first. People of middle life like him lived through sieges and famines when the young and the old died.

To think of people being hungry for want of such a coin as this!

He had seen the old hungry. As president of the Coal Fund he had visited poor old people. He had seen their dropped jaws, their dim eyes, their feeble gait, their degraded humanity. He had seen women, old women who had once occupied comfortable positions, hobbling

along the frozen streets with tickets for coal in their hands, while boys followed jeering at them. He had heard these respectable old women utter words of gratitude so humiliating to themselves, that he had felt to listen was more the punishment of a crime than the reward of a humane action.

Once at a Christmas-time he went to see a poor widow on behalf of whom application had been made to the fund. Her husband had been a well-to-do tradesman of Daneford. He found the poor creature in a most pitiable plight. She had nothing but a bundle of straw for a bed, and the ragged remains of an old patchwork counterpane. There were two broken chairs, a delf cup, and no saucer. This was a full inventory of the widow's goods. The old woman said she did not feel hunger half so much as cold. She was used to hunger all the year round,

now and then; but the winter cold was terrible. When hungry and cold, you were tortured from within and without. For twelve months she had not tasted hot meat, and for six months neither eggs nor butter. Sprats were then three-halfpence for two pounds, and bread three-halfpence a pound. Two pounds of sprats, two pounds of bread, and the use of a neighbour's fire, carried her over two days very nicely, but that came to fourpence-halfpenny; and when she had paid eighteenpence a week for the room, it was not easy to find fourpence-halfpenny every two days for living. In coming away he gave her half-a-sovereign. She threw herself down on her knees to him, and thanked him and Providence that she should now have warm stockings and taste meat once more before she died. That thin old woman had thrown herself on her knees to *him* because she was

hungry and cold, and he had given her half-a-sovereign! Thrown herself on her knees to him! When he came home he told Bee, and Bee had wept and sent the old woman clothes. He told his mother, too, about this old woman, and his mother had gone to see her and sat with her, and never lost sight of her until the poor woman died.

What changes since then! Bee had gone, and his mother was a pauper fugitive.

His stately keen-minded mother a penniless fugitive! Intolerable! There must be some mistake. Fancy for a moment his proud high-spirited mother being obliged to stoop and accept help! Fancy such a thing, she who had always had a full larder and purse at the service of royal generosity! The mere idea was preposterous on the face of it. And yet there were the figures of Evans. His

mother prostrate at the feet of a stranger, thanking him for food!

"Oh, God, who is our master, and who is the master of our joys and our woes, afflict me with what Thou wilt, but take away that vision! Take away that vision from before my eyes! Give me all other pains but that sight, the result of my misdoings."

He had risen, and was praying with all the might of his soul, his face and hands thrown up, and the tones of terrible beseeching in his voice.

Suddenly he sank to his knees and drew his arms swiftly and strongly across his eyes; swaying his body to and fro, he moaned out in piteous entreaty:

"Oh, God of mercy, show mercy to me, and turn away from me my mother's eyes!"

There was a knock at the door.

He staggered feebly to his feet, and

took a few hasty inspirations before asking :

"Who's there?"

"I, sir."

"What do you want?"

"The mail is going out, sir."

"Well?"

"Have you any letters to go?"

"No, Doughty."

"But there's the Castle bag, sir. I want the letters out of that."

"True; thank you for reminding me of them." He opened the door. "Here is the key." He handed it through the door, adding: "I am most particularly engaged. Let no one come to me."

He retired from the door feebly. He went back to the fire and sat down.

In half an hour he rang his bell. The porter entered.

"Are the letters posted?"

"Yes, sir."

"All gone?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do." To himself he thought with his hand on his brow: "I forgot something about the Castle letters. I forget still what it was. I should have —I remember now. Well, it does not make much difference."

CHAPTER VII.

LOSING.

For a few days after the meeting between Grey and his mother at the Castle he did not go to the Island. Something repelled him. The thought of the Castle made him chill and uncomfortable now. He had never gone so far as to try and persuade himself he was in love with Maud. He never pretended to himself he felt more than a mild interest in her. The nature of the circumstances surrounding him and impelling him towards Maud had almost wholly obliterated the personality of the girl. She was a minus quantity in the equation of his life.

Could he bring her over to the other side, the minus would become a plus, and he should be saved. He was too much impressed with the necessity of winning her to regard her personality with much interest.

Now he seemed to have receded further from her. He was no less impressed with the necessity of winning her than before, but between her and him had come of late a shadow, stretching from that interview at which his mother, Maud, and himself, had assisted.

At first this shadow was vague, indistinct, a source of indefinable uneasiness rather than absolute pain. Gradually, hour by hour after that interview, his subsequent discoveries in the fly, and at Evans's office, the appearance of vagueness disappeared, the repelling image took absolute form, and between the girl and himself flitted the form of a feeble beggared mother.

He had made no effort to trace Mrs. Grey. He knew nothing on earth would induce her to take aid from him. He knew she could not be reached indirectly, for she would suspect any side approach to be of his contriving. When she would not keep a shilling of her own honest money to buy bread, there was no likelihood of her receiving stolen money from his hand.

"I have already sacrificed two women, am I about to sacrifice a third?" He put this question to himself often, but took little interest in the answer. If any other means of extricating himself offered, he would have abandoned his design of marrying Maud. He saw no other loophole of escape.

"If I don't marry Maud, sooner or later it will be found out I have made fraudulent uses of my power of attorney, and they will seize me, search the Bank

and the Manor, and—hang me out of one of the crossbars of that tank—always supposing I do not take the liberty of cheating the hangman by making away with myself."

He began to feel jaded, and people saw changes in him, and asked him if he was quite well. When not racked by dread or torn by remorse, a strange languor fell upon him, and he could not rouse himself to do anything not absolutely necessary.

In these languid moments he would think to himself: "I have been over-trained by crime, and I am not capable of fighting as of old."

The first day he called at the Castle after meeting his mother there, Maud could not be seen. She sent down Mrs. Grant to say she hoped Mr. Grey would excuse her, as she had a headache, and Mrs. Grant had recommended her to keep to her room.

This was an agreeable disappointment. He had come to the Island and requested he might see Maud, not as a matter of liking at the moment, but as part of a scheme of self-protection laid down when full of life and vigour, and now carried out with diminished forces.

He formally examined the work upon which the men were engaged, and took an early leave of the Island.

A meeting with Maud that day would have been too much for him. He did not feel equal to urging his suit; allusion might have been made to his manner on the last occasion, and he felt he could not carry off the fiction of the imaginary dispute of the will with a hand sufficiently light and firm.

He had now a vague fear—it went beyond fear, and assumed the settled form of conviction—that his explanation of his violence had not satisfied Maud. She

might really have been indisposed, but of old so slight an indisposition as headache would not have excluded him from her presence. He was quite sure Maud had told him the truth, and that his mother had divulged nothing prejudicial to him. But this was not all. His mother may have divulged nothing, and yet his manner, his terror at the sight of her, his violence when she had gone, and his subsequent statement that litigation was not impossible, might have created an impression not to be removed easily from the mind of the girl.

He allowed a few days more to elapse before calling again.

Mrs. Grant came to him and said Miss Midharst was so miserably wretched and unwell she must ask Mr. Grey to be good enough to excuse her not receiving him.

"I have been very unfortunate with

Miss Midharst of late," said the banker, with a smile to the little widow.

"She is so nervous and excitable," said Mrs. Grant, who seemed uneasy and disconcerted.

"Until quite lately I have had the pleasure of seeing Miss Midharst daily. I have not been able to come here so often as of old, and when I do come I am so unfortunate as to find Miss Midharst laid up." There was complaint in his tone.

Mrs. Grant felt exceedingly awkward. Maud had told her of Mr. Grey's extraordinary conduct at their last interview. At her suggestion Maud had written to Sir William and avoided an interview with the banker. Maud had had a headache when he called last, but it was not bad enough to prevent her seeing him if nothing unusual had happened. To-day she was not unusually nervous,

but she dreaded an interview with the banker so much she became hysterical when his name had been announced. Still Mrs. Grant's old feeling for Mr. Grey could not be put aside in a minute, and now that she was face to face with him who had been so useful and so kind, and found him complaining of exclusion from the presence of her over whose fortunes the dead baronet had made him guardian, she felt powerless and wretched. She said, in an unsteady voice and confused manner :

" I am sure I am very sorry you should have been twice disappointed in seeing Miss Midharst. It is unfortunate. But I hope you will not think she intends any disrespect to you. I know nothing is further from her thoughts."

Grey took the widow's hand gently in his. He felt conscious he was not as strong as formerly. He had now no friend

in the world. A woman, a widow, had been his greatest friend. He knew Mrs. Grant meant him well.

"Mrs. Grant," he said, "I am sure I have a sincere friend in you."

"I am sure you have," she answered tremulously.

"Will you do me a great favour?"

"There is no one in the world, except Maud, for whom I would so soon do all I can," she said earnestly.

"You will be candid with me, I know. You will be candid with me because you could not be otherwise with anyone, and you will answer my question as a favour?"

"If I can I will; you may rely upon that."

"I knew I was right. My question is: Has anything occurred to make Miss Midharst disinclined to meet me?"

"She is not very well."

"You were good enough to tell me that some time ago. My question has reference to something else. Has anything of a personal nature occurred to make Miss Midharst disinclined to meet me?"

"You know, Mr. Grey, that when Sir William was here Maud made a promise to him."

"Yes. That she would look upon him as her personal guardian. Is it to that you refer?"

"It is. I believe Miss Midharst wishes to consult her cousin on some subject of importance. She has written to him."

"And will not receive me until she gets his reply? Is that what I am to understand, Mrs. Grant?" Grey's voice quavered, and his whole body shook. How had that letter escaped him?

"I do not think Maud will be quite strong enough to see you for a few days more."

"That is, until she hears from her cousin?"

"Until she sees him."

"*Sees him!* What do you mean?"

"She wrote him, asking him to come back, if he could."

"That is not true. I never saw the letter," he whispered.

"Yes. She wrote him the day she saw you last, and he is coming back. He has telegraphed to her saying so."

"The day she saw me last! The day I met another woman talking to her."

"Yes."

"Was it at the suggestion of that woman she wrote for Sir William to come home?"

"No; that lady did not, as far as I can hear, mention Sir William's name."

"And that was the day," said Grey, letting fall Mrs. Grant's hand and pressing it against his throbbing forehead—"that

was the day I forgot the bag. How soon is Sir Alexander expected here?"

"Sir William, you mean."

"Ah, yes; Sir William I mean, of course. I forgot—I forgot!"

"We don't know exactly when he may be here, but he will certainly not be longer than a fortnight."

"And between this and then Miss Midharst will not see me?"

He had still his hand on his brow. She did not answer.

Without taking any further notice of her he walked feebly out of the room. For an hour he wandered aimlessly about the Castle grounds. There were men at work, but he took no notice of them. When it grew dusk he crossed over in a boat to the mainland, and set out to walk home.

The cool air and the walking gradually improved his tone, and little by little he

became familiar with the new aspect of affairs. He was conscious of mental indifference, weakness, or numbness—he did not know exactly what it was. Thoughts and ideas and things had lost half their values to him. He felt like a man who wakes for the first time in a prison where he is to pass his life, only the prisoner's heart is afflicted with the memory of a better past. Grey, as he walked along, did not once turn his eyes back. He kept them fixed rigidly forward.

In the immediate future he saw he should lose all influence at the Castle. The moment Sir William came home his suspicions would be aroused. He would make inquiries, and find not a single shilling of Sir Alexander's money in the books of the Bank of England.

Then would come ruin and death, or death and ruin—put it either way. He was beaten. He confessed it to himself.

Discovery could not be three weeks off. There was no loophole—no means of escape. The days of abduction were dead and buried long ago. He could not carry Maud away forcibly and marry her. He had, by law, no control over her person. She would not see him until Sir William's return. Most likely she was acting under the young man's advice in not seeing him.

A month ago he was keener, and would have felt angry at the interference of this young man and the stubbornness of this girl; but he was past all that now. He was beaten, beaten beyond all hope of retrieving his fortune. His life was forfeit. His name would be branded for ever in the town where it had been almost worshipped for years.

And when he had died by his own hand, and all had been discovered, his mother, a wanderer on the land, would,

as she sank into a pauper's grave, learn the enormity of his crime, and call out that the sin of having brought such a monster into the world might be taken away from her in consideration of the wrongs he had done her.

No! no! no! Ten thousand times No! His mother should never hear the awful words: "Henry Walter Grey found guilty of Wife Murder," or, "Discovery of the body of Mrs. Henry Walter Grey, with a history of her murder by her husband."

No; that must never be. But how was he to prevent it? Only one way remained.

If he could hide the embezzlement, he could hide the murder. There was now only one way of hiding the fraud: he must throw himself on the mercy of Miss Midharst and her cousin. The moment Sir William returned, he should make a

full confession. While there is life there is hope, and that was not a foolish hope. Sir William was young and chivalric. Sir William would listen to his prayer and show mercy.

CHAPTER VIII.

"I AM HE. FIRE."

The morning after Grey had been at the Castle, he awoke cold and depressed. The magnitude of the misfortune just come upon him was more apparent than the evening before. Up to yesterday he had been fighting to defeat the past and render the future glorious. Henceforth all thought of glory must be cast aside, and the struggle conducted solely with a view to prevent fatal disgrace. He had lost the stake, and ran a grave risk of losing his life. He had been playing against Sir William Midharst. Now he was playing against the hangman.

The day of the baronet's return was not known. The young man must pass through Daneford on his way to the Castle. More than likely he would call at the "Warfinger Hotel," to leave his luggage there before setting out for the Island.

Grey went to the "Warfinger Hotel," saw the landlord, told him Sir William was expected home; and requested him to send instantly to the Bank word of the baronet's arrival.

He felt queer to-day. That old sensation of everything being far away and of little interest to him had come back upon him fourfold. He went through the routine business of the Bank with as little interest as a copying-clerk. He signed papers without reading them, and did not understand those he read.

And now day after day the banker lived without change or adventure. All his life

he had been a man of action, a leader, and now he was wearily waiting, waiting in weak hope haunted by fierce terrors. He felt his physical health declining under the ordeal, but he had no alternative.

At last one afternoon, as he was sitting alone in his private office a messenger came from the "Warfinger Hotel" announcing the return of Sir William. The baronet had just arrived and ordered luncheon, so that in all likelihood he would be at the hotel for an hour or two.

Grey rose heavily and walked to the hotel with a misgiving heart. He carried in his hand his small black bag.

What reason had he to think this young man would take a merciful view of the case? All his pride was gone now, except the pride in a good name he did not deserve. He would crawl on his knees in private to this young man, rather than lower his front a jot before the public.

If he could win over this young man he might save his name. It was not the hangman he dreaded most. It was not death. It was the groans and execrations of people over whom he once held imperial sway, and by whom he had been regarded as the high-priest of humanity and justice.

When he arrived at the hotel, he sent in his card and was instantly admitted.

The young man fixed his dark dreamy eyes upon the other as he entered, rose slowly from his chair, and held out his hand freely, saying:

"I am very much obliged to you for calling. I wanted to see you particularly."

This was unexpected. Grey thought Sir William would refuse to meet him until after a visit to the Castle. What did the young man know? Grey said:

"I have to speak to you on a very important matter indeed, and I would wish to speak to you about it at once."

"I am quite at your service for an hour. Sit down. You are not looking as well as I should like to see so good a friend."

"Friend!" sighed Grey. "Don't use that word again until I have finished."

A quick look of present interest came into the dreamy eyes. The baronet said: "I am ready to hear."

"I have been told by Mrs. Grant that you have come home to consult with Miss Midharst about some important matter—I do not know what, and I do not seek to know. Before you see Miss Midharst, I want to say to you some words of the deepest importance, and I want you to permit me to — lock the door." He was grave and collected in manner, and as he said the last words he waved his hand softly towards the door.

"You may lock the door," said Sir

William, taking an easy-chair, and relapsing into his dreamy manner.

The banker walked slowly to the door, locked it deliberately, and then came back to the window at which the young man was sitting. Then he sat down on a chair opposite Sir William, having placed his bag on a small table that stood between them.

The day was bright and clear. Past the wall of the hotel through which that window looked ran the Weeslade. It was ebb tide, and now and then down the river shot a small boat or glided a barge, while from the upper wharves came the sound of chains and tackles, and the hoarse hoot of the steamboat blowing off steam.

For a few seconds Grey sat silent, resting his head upon his hand. At last he spoke :

"You have been asked to come back from Egypt to give advice to Miss

Midharst on some subject of importance. You are by your relationship with her, and by her own agreement with you, the guardian of her person. I am by the will of her father the guardian of her fortune. *Yours* is a precious trust."

Grey paused here to give the young man an opportunity of saying something. Sir William merely said: "That is so."

"What I have further to say to you," continued Grey, "is in the nature, Sir William, of a confession. A confession so degrading and humiliating, that I have debated a thousand times whether I should make it or put an end to my life."

"I am sincerely glad you adopted the alternative of confiding in me."

"Sir William, what do you consider the greatest calamity which could befall Miss Midharst?"

"Really I have not thought of such

a question, and could not answer it off-hand."

"What would you do to the man who behaved in an unscrupulous manner to Miss Midharst?"

Suddenly the young man lost his languid manner, sat bolt upright in his chair, looked with a strong present interest in his eyes at the banker, and demanded sharply: "What do you mean?"

Grey raised his head, and for the first time the eyes of the two men met.

"A terrible injury, an irreparable injury; who had inflicted upon her an injury so great that the sacrifice of his life could not atone for it, not the devotion of a lifetime undo it?"

"Shoot him. Where is he?"

Grey opened the black bag, took out the revolver, and holding the muzzle pointed at his own breast, handed it to the baronet, saying: "I am he. Fire."

The young man sprang to his feet, seized the revolver, and keeping the banker covered with it, said thickly through his clenched teeth: "A moment. Wait a moment."

For some seconds there was neither motion nor word. The one man stood over the other, the revolver in his hand, his finger on the trigger.

"I have thought of Maud until I am ready to shoot you here. Now speak. What was it?"

"She is a beggar."

"How?"

"I have stolen all her fortune. I sold out the Consols and used the money. The money is all gone."

"Have you confessed all?"

"Yes; all."

"And are you ready to die for that?"

"I am."

"There is nothing for you to add about Maud?"

"No. I have told you all candidly."

The young man seized Grey by the throat, and pulled him upon his feet. For a moment he swayed the banker to and fro.

"Not this. Fire if you are a man. Not this."

"Damnation seize you for a fool! You terrified me about nothing." He flung Grey violently from him.

"About nothing! I told you all her money is gone."

"And when did I tell you I wanted her money?"

"You never said anything to me about it."

"You are a fool, sir, and have terrified me for nothing."

Sir William stooped down, picked up the revolver. which had fallen from his hand in the scuffle, and raising the window quietly dropped it into the

Weeslade. Then turning to the banker he said:

"Who knows of this?"

"Only you and I and my mother."

"That is true, is it?"

"It is."

"Miss Midharst has no suspicion of it?"

"Not the slightest. Only three people on earth know it. The three I have named."

"Keep the secret where it is, and meet me here to-morrow at noon. I shall then let you know what I intend doing."

CHAPTER IX.

BANKER AND BARONET.

NEXT noon, as appointed, Grey called at the "Warfinger Hotel" and saw Sir William. The interview was a brief one. Sir William informed the banker he had made up his mind to only one thing so far, namely, to keep the secret and do nothing for a month or two. "This looks very like compounding a felony," said the young man, "but I am prepared to take that risk."

Grey went away respited. It was a great relief nothing was to be done at once, but when something came to be done what would it be? That was the

question which followed Grey day and night, waking and sleeping, through two long weary months. One qualifying fact operated greatly in his favour: day after day he lost susceptibility. Something was happening which dulled his sense of danger or exposure. He had begun to forget more and more, and it was only on rare occasions he had a clear and well-defined idea of his position. He had a weak conviction Sir William would not have him prosecuted, but what would the young man do?

But if the tyranny of the theft had lost its poignancy, he had two fiercer troubles left.

Every old broken-down woman he met in the street was his mother. By day he met his mother a thousand times; she crawled close to the wall, she had sold all her clothes for bread, she had worn out her boots, and her bare feet, her

poor old bare feet, touched the cold wet streets. If he took up a paper his eye fell on some paragraph relating to the death in great misery of an old woman over seventy who had seen better days.

But it was when the twilight had died, and all the land lay in the dark trance of night, the prime actor in his mental disaster entered on the scene.

In order that he might marry Maud and so cover up his robbery, he had taken upon him the awful burden of blood. Now Maud had slipped through his grasp, and there was a chance his theft might still remain undisclosed. What was his position with regard to the deed of the seventeenth of August? If the warm-breathing body of his wife were by his side he should be in no worse position.

When the dusk came down upon the earth, when the fields lay under the shadow of the wings of ill angels, the warm and

breathing body of his wife was not at his side, but there, no matter where he might sit, was the clammy cold thing he had left that night on the top of the Tower of Silence. It lay in passage and hall, and in the dining-room it was always stiff and stark behind his chair, where he could not see it, but whence the clammy chill radiating from it reached his back and froze his spirit.

That was not the worst, for it was vague ; not the figure of his wife so much as that of the victim of murder. Over one shoulder, he knew not which, came that face, not now calm and passionless as before, but full of love and tender reproach, an expression in which the love out-measured the reproach ten thousand-fold. It was this new look of old love made him shut his fists, and grind his teeth, and sob and groan.

From the ghastly caverns of night's

silence whispers of her voice came to him pleading for mercy.

"Do not, for God's sake, Wat, do not send me in my sin before my Maker!"

These awful whispers made him start and stare, and caused the cold sweat to start from all the pores of his body.

Then followed night and dreams. When he awoke after dreams he always thought the dreaming worse than waking. When he sought his bed at night he prayed for dreams as a relief. In the privacy of his own room, and in the still deeper privacy of dreams, he was always in her presence when the rustle of her dress made his pulses thicken with joy.

These dreams were his only resting-places. But, unfortunately, not only did they not last always, but towards the end of each it changed and died in an awful sense of unascertainable disaster. Something had happened to his love, something

so hideous and unheard of, that not man or woman, beast or stone, would tell him the secret. With a great shout he awoke, sprang out of bed to seek for his love through all the world, tore open the door, and found his murdered wife lying across the threshold, and upon his hands her blood.

Day by day the influence of these terrors wrought on Grey until his eyes grew dim, his hands palsied, his gait feeble, and his mind dull. He forgot oftener now than formerly. In the midst of business transactions he would stop suddenly, put his hand to his head, mutter a few incoherent words, cease speaking for a while, and then exclaim piteously: "I have forgotten something! I have forgotten something!"

All who came in contact with him saw he was breaking down. They said:

"Poor Grey loved his wife so deeply,

so tenderly, he is losing his reason for loss of her."

This popular verdict was not only a great cause of drawing sympathy towards the widower, but almost wholly washed away the stain which had smirched his dead wife's name. For those who had heard of her failing, and believed it fact, now asked themselves:

"How could any man care for a woman so afflicted? How could any man wear away his life in sorrow for the loss of an intemperate wife?"

The evening Grey first visited Sir William Midharst at the "Warfinger Hotel" the young man went to the Castle and had a long talk with Maud, in which she told him of Grey's extraordinary conduct on the occasion of the unknown old woman's visit. She did not tell him she suspected the banker had been trying to make himself more than agreeable to her.

He did not say anything to her of the scene between the banker and himself at the "Warfinger." He heard all Maud had to say to him without comment beyond expressions of surprise.

"I know the whole secret," he thought, "but I must have time to think out the situation before I decide on a course of action. When I have considered all the points I shall not be slow to move."

As he was going down a corridor after saying good-night to Maud Mrs. Grant overtook him.

She said: "How can you account for Mr. Grey's conduct, Sir William? I cannot understand it at all. Of course Maud told you all. You do not think his manner of wooing likely to win?"

"His manner of wooing! I was told nothing of his wooing. Did he make love to Maud?"

"Ah, did she not tell you. I suppose

the poor child felt it might not be delicate to mention the matter. He has been making downright love to her. She told me all about it. That's the extraordinary part of the thing; he has been making love to her, and then he breaks out into that violent manner all at once. Acting, indeed! I don't believe a word of it."

"So," thought Sir William to himself, as he went home to his hotel, "I did not know the whole secret, but I think I have it all now. Of course, if he married Maud he need say nothing about the money. It's all gone, no doubt. A man would not tell such a lie and offer to back it up with a bullet. Let me see now. My return has forced his hand. He saw he had no chance of winning Maud. What a preposterous idea to think of his making love to my angel Maud! What insolent persumption!

Poor Maud a beggar through his means! It is well I am not. I suppose we can live on the old estate as the Midharsts have done for generations before us. I am full of hope. I am drunk with the belief Maud shall be mine. I think she is glad I am back, and will be glad to see me every day. Fancy seeing Maud every day from this out! Fancy being permitted to take her hand, and to feel that hand on my arm! Fancy being able to say 'Maud' a thousand times a day to herself and not to an image of her. Oh, Maud, my beautiful, be with me for ever as the flowers are with summer.

"What shall I do with this scoundrel Grey? He was very nearly too deep for me. He imposed on me, but that is all over now. What am I to do with him? If he is prosecuted there will be worry, and the past will be gone into, and the peculiarities of Sir Alexander,

among other things his hatred of me and the, let me say, friendship between his daughter and me.

"They might call Maud, these lawyers have no taste, no sense of propriety. Think of putting Maud in the box and cross-examining her, and—yes, by Heavens, some of those legal bullies might be ungentle to my lily sweet Maud.

"What a wonderful thing Maud's hand is. It is like the moon, always the same, and yet you can't be in sight of it without looking at it often.

"But this scoundrel Grey. I wish I were done with him. I have given up all taste for affairs and difficulties. I am become bucolic. Suppose he is prosecuted we can't get the money back, for such a prosecution would shut up his Bank. We should have all the trouble and worry for nothing. Then what is the object of prosecuting the scoundrel?

"It is strange about Maud's hand. I thought as I looked at it this evening that if I were dying of wounds on a battle-field, parched with that last terrible thirst, and Maud came and put her hand on my forehead, the thirst would leave me. I know it would.

"But about Grey?

"Yes. Isn't it too bad that when I have Maud to think about this wretched Grey should thrust himself in between Maud and me. I wish the devil would take Grey. He'll want that bland burglar sometime, and he'd oblige me greatly by taking him now.

"What a beautiful thing Maud's ear is. While I was looking at it to-night I found out why when I speak to her I seem to pray; it is because I know my words must reach the spirit of a saint.

"But here is this Grey. I am to meet him to-morrow and let him know

my decision. I wish the devil would take him now, or Heaven would inspire me what to do with him. If the money had been mine I should before going to bed to-night sign a receipt for the full amount, send the receipt to him, and beg of him never to allude to the matter again.

"If the money was mine!

"Ah! That is a thought worth considering twice.

"If I marry Maud the supposititious money will be mine. I don't want the money if I could get it, and I can't get it, or any of it, if I wanted it. The prosecution would involve nothing but trouble and worry.

"Come, on the day I marry Maud, I'll give him a clear receipt for it! But I'll put him off for a couple of months and then tell him.

"If all the rest of the world were mine on the day I marry Maud, and it

would save her worry not to take it, I should pass it by.

"My gentle Maud, you are the infinite sum of all my earthly hopes to which nothing can be added, from which nothing can be taken away."

CHAPTER X.

GREY REMEMBERS.

GREY sat in his breakfast-room turning over his letters. Suddenly his eyes fell on one and remained fixed on it.

"At last," he thought, "at last I am to hear something of her, of my poor old mother. Whatever this tells me is all I am likely ever to know of her until I die. To-night I cut off for ever my connection with the career of Wat Grey. To-day Wat Grey departs this life of Daneford."

He broke the envelope and found these unsigned, undated words:

"Through the kindness of some honest

friends of your honest father I am now in a London almshouse, so I am fully provided for. I think it only right you should know this. I have seen by the papers that Sir William Midharst will, the morning you get this, marry Miss Midharst. I handed that lady all I had in the world to the last penny. I do not know how you have evaded discovery so long. But follow my example, and give back to the robbed all you have left in the world. These are my last words to you."

He put down the letter, sighed, and muttered:

"An ungracious final leave-taking, mother, an ungracious farewell. The giving back forms no part of my plan. Sir William would not touch a penny. You yourself will relent and be sorrowful when you hear of this day's events, for they will get into the papers as well as

the marriage of Sir William. The newspapers will have the marriage paragraph, and then one headed, 'Shocking Death of Mr. Henry Walter Grey.'

"No, mother, I must save my name and save my reputation, and both can be best preserved by sacrificing Wat Grey. Wat Grey must go to keep his name good. There is no need he should really die. It will be quite enough if he change his habitation and his name.

"I am not strong enough to fight it out any longer. I cannot leave this house as it is, and this house is killing me. It is killing me slowly with its awful sights and sounds and memories. I must, I will fly. This very night I shall leave it for ever, and I shall leave it incapable of telling any tales.

"At one blow I shall destroy its sights, and its sounds, and its memories, and cut myself off from it, Daneford, and the

past for ever. I shall get rid of all the burden I bear. I shall break away from all my old associations, all things to remind me of the past. With twenty thousand pounds in my pocket, and the whole breadth of sunny France between me and this place, I shall be at ease. They may charge my memory with the crime of theft, but I shall leave evidence of my innocence behind me. Farleg may come back and accuse my name of murder; but he will have neither Wat Grey nor evidence against Wat Grey, for Wat Grey and the evidence against him will disappear together, and I will live a quiet life beyond the Alps or the Pyrenees."

He leant back in his chair and reviewed his preparations with the deliberate complaisance of one whose plans were unassailable.

"Yes, everything so far is arranged.

I have the money. I have the letter written to Aldridge, saying I enclose Sir William's acknowledgment for the amount of Consols converted into cash at his request, and handed to him on this the day of his wedding with Miss Midharst. I also tell Aldridge I send him this to put in the strong-room, as I shall not go into town to-morrow, but stay at home attending to some final business connected with the Midharst affairs. I have paid all the small legacies, and made investments to yield the annuities. For two months I have been sleeping in the tower-room, so that no one will expect me to sleep anywhere else. I have got that rope-ladder ready to hook on the bar of the back window, and the piece of twine rove through the hook to unship the ladder when I am down safe on the ground. Once I am on the ground I start on my way to France, and I walk to-night at

the burial of the past. There can be no hitch. Things must run smooth. To-morrow I shall be free! Free!"

He stood up and looked around him triumphantly. Suddenly his face grew pale and expressionless. He pressed his hand to his forehead, his lips opened feebly, and he muttered:

"I have forgotten something! I have forgotten something!"

He dropped down in his chair, and for a few minutes his face did not alter. All at once the natural look came back. He rose again, shook himself briskly, and said:

"Another of those half-fainting fits I have been free from so long. They were worst when my mind was most tortured. Of late I have been almost free from them. They will disappear altogether when I get south, and to-morrow at this hour I shall be out of bondage."

It was now time to set out for the Castle. It had been arranged that he should attend and give away the bride. "If I am not present," said the banker to Sir William, "there will be no end of remarks made, and if I do attend it will be as Miss Midharst's guardian, in which capacity, there being no relative, I ought to give away the bride." And Sir William, seeing no harm in this, and wanting to avert comment as much as possible, consented.

A full year had not elapsed since the death of Sir Alexander, but several considerations beyond the impatience of the baronet made it desirable the wedding should take place at once.

Maud was alone in the world and had no protector but him. She was in mourning, and objected to go to London and be brought out so soon after her father's death. The Castle was lonely

and dreary. They were engaged to be married, and it could make no difference to anyone, and could be no offence against the puny laws of society, if they got married within the year and lived quietly at the Castle until the time of mourning had passed. Then they could go to London. They should know very few people at first, but that would soon be altered.

So the marriage had been fixed to take place on Wednesday the 8th of August, 1877.

The wedding was to be strictly private. No one was to be present but Mrs. Grant and Mr. Grey. The ceremony was to be performed by the rector, and the tenants were informed that the bride and bridegroom desired no demonstration of any kind.

After the ceremony Sir William and Lady Midharst were to return to the

Castle, where no unusual preparation would be made to receive them.

This simple programme was carried out without let or accident. Grey and the baronet drove from Daneford, Maud and Mrs. Grant from the Castle, to the quiet country church, where the rector performed the short service by request. In the vestry Sir William handed Grey an envelope containing something. He said, "This is it, Grey." No more.

From the church the four drove back to Island Ferry. Here Grey bade the party good-bye. Sir William in saying good-bye added, under his breath, so that no one but Grey heard him, "for ever." Grey echoes the "for ever" in his heart, but took no further notice of the supplement to the farewell.

The banker then drove back to the Manor House.

"My last visit to the Castle," he

thought, as he swept up the carriage-drive. "My last entry into the Manor House. To-day I bid a life-long adieu to the Weird Sisters. I am not sorry. I am over weary and want rest. I have allowed nothing to stand between me and ambition. I have lost the game and now I want only peace. What I have done cannot be undone. In a new climate, among new people, the past, the Weird Sisters, the Towers of Silence, and the story of my tower will fade into the background, and the thing of the seventeenth of August will become as vague and shadowy to my mind as the story of the Spanish lady whose bones were found on the top of the tower in Warfinger Castle."

He had many things to arrange at the Manor that day, and had determined not to go to the Bank. He opened the envelope Sir William had given him, and found in it what he had been promised: a receipt

in full for claims upon him in settlement of Miss Midharst's money. This receipt he put into the letter he had ready written for Aldridge and posted it. There had been trouble about the marriage settlement, but as Grey was guardian, and the baronet knew all about the money, things had gone smoothly in the end.

He spent most of the remainder of the day in the library looking through various books and accounts, but having slight interest in them. The day before a girl marries she cannot take a very lively interest in the gardener's work at her father's house. She is going to wear another name, break from old associations, and take up her residence in a new home. By to-morrow Grey would have changed his name, broken from old associations, and taken up his residence in a new home.

Day grew on and at last dinner-hour arrived. He was too much excited to eat;

he played with a cutlet, and drank three glasses of marvellous brown sherry for which he was famous. After dinner, although he rarely touched spirits, he had a glass of brandy-and-water with his cigar.

At eight o'clock he rang for coffee. When James came with it he said: "I am going to bed soon. I shall not require you or any of the others again to-night. I shall want breakfast half an hour earlier than usual in the morning, at eight o'clock. Call me at five minutes to seven. I am not going to town to-morrow, but shall stay at home all day. Good-night."

Grey waited a few minutes to give James time to get out of hearing. Then he rose, and took his way to the room he had slept in of late, the first floor of the Tower of Silence.

It was now half-past eight.

"In half an hour I shall be free," he exclaimed rapturously to himself, as he turned up the gas.

He shook the thick shutters of the window to ascertain that they were secure. He lit a candle, went up those hideous stairs to the first floor, bolted the shutters on the front window there and the shutters on the landing window.

"I do not want the neighbours to see it too soon or they might come and *rescue* me." He chuckled at the idea of being rescued, and descended to the storey beneath. On the landing here the window stood open. He looked out. All was still below. None of his household had ever occasion to go to the rear of the house after nightfall. No stranger could approach the house at the rear unless by passing through that hideous grove.

The night was calm and dark and still. "Nothing could be better," thought

Grey, as he fixed the hooks of a ladder of ropes to an iron bar of the small balcony, and ascertained that the twine by which these hooks were to be unshipped ran freely through the ring screwed into the window-frame.

"All's well," he thought. "Now be quick!"

Going back again into the first-floor room, he rapidly took off his black frock-coat, light trousers, and waistcoat, and put on a tight-fitting corduroy suit, a pair of false whiskers and moustaches, and a low round hat.

When this was done he looked in the glass, and started back with a shout. "By Jove!" cried he, after a moment; "I thought all was lost. I thought my own reflection was another man's! I *am* already another man. I feel it in every fibre. No one who knew me, and thinks I am dead, would recognise me. I might

walk down the streets of Daneford to-morrow, and talk about my own sad end to my most intimate friend, and he would not recognise me. The Daneford Bank would open an account for me to-morrow in the name of Grey, and observe no likeness between their new customer and their old master. I am a new man already. I feel new blood in all my veins, new sinews in all my limbs; the nightmare of the past is vanishing; I shall sleep now of nights, and whistle once more while I dress of mornings. Ten thousand times better this feeling than all the pomp my ambition longed for with the canker and the care."

He took from the pocket of the coat he had removed a small packet, thinking: "All I want is the money. Twenty thousand pounds will be a large fortune in either Spain or Italy."

He threw the clothes he had worn on the bed, opened the cupboard, and took

out one after another four cans. Two of these he emptied over his own bed, one on the floor and furniture, and one on the landing and first flight of the stairs. Turpentine !

He then threw the four cans on the bed, wrenched off the gas-brackets and set fire to the gas at the ends of the broken pipes.

He cast one hasty glance round.

"All right !"

He struck a match and held it to the saturated bed.

A little spirt of flame shot out of the counterpane to the match. The spirt of flame then fell back and spread slowly until it formed a spire as large as a pine-cone.

Grey backed to the door and seized the handle.

From that cone flashed twenty javelins of light this way and that. The air of

the room sobbed, and a solid mass of white flame stood up over that bed.

Swiftly opening the door Grey sprang out, and shut the door leading to the landing. A second he stood there, threw up his hands, and cried in a husky voice:

"Saved!"

He looked out of the window.

"All right."

He put his hand on the iron bar.

"Quite firm."

Suddenly he drew back. Had he seen anyone below?

No.

He put his hand on his breast.

"The money is here," he whispered to himself, "but I have forgotten something. What is it?" A few seconds passed and he yelled: "I know! I know! What I forgot is on the roof."

With furious speed he dashed up the noisome stairs.

As he did so there arose a soft flapping sound at the door on the landing, and a lazy serpent of white flame crawled across the landing and climbed up the stairs.

A sweetheart of one of the maid-servants, leaving the Manor House by the side door at half-past nine, saw fire issuing from the window on the first floor of the tower, ran back to the servants' hall, and gave the alarm.

By that time the fire raged madly, rioting on the parched woodwork of the staircase and the dry joists and planks of the floors. The staircase was a cavern of white flame. In front of the glare rushed a fierce column of black suffocating smoke. Twice already had a man tried to force his way down, and twice had he been driven back before the scalding vapour. Now he crouched on the roof in the corner furthest from the tank.

By ten a small crowd had assembled and he could hear men at work. The roof was getting hot ; now and then the opening from the staircase panted forth a cloud of sparks.

" If they see me they will try to save me. They will come here, find out all, and save me—for the gallows. Better the fire."

He crouched closer and held his breath lest they should hear him breathe. He had no memory of how he came to that roof. He must have rushed there in one of those unconscious moments.

At half-past ten red tongues began to issue from the opening in the roof.

By a quarter to eleven the weight of the tank told on the sapped roof. That portion showed signs of subsidence.

Still the man crouched low, his eyes now fixed in agonised expectation on the tank.

The man on the roof heard the clocks of Daneford strike eleven. Just then the tank trembled, swayed a moment, then shot downward with a roar. Up the hole made by it danced a cloud of flame.

The man on the roof sprang to his feet, and with a shout leaped on the parapet crying:

"Help! Help! For God's sake, help!"

With that tank the evidence against him had vanished.

A groan came up from the people below, and then a cheer.

"The fire-escape is coming. Have courage!"

Shading his eyes with his hands he looked in the direction of the lodge, and saw approaching by the carriage-way the fire-escape.

"Help! Quick!"

"Courage, Wat! We will save you!"

Another crash. Something warm struck his back. He turned round. All the roof was gone now. He looked into a pool of flame.

A fiercer blow than the former. Sight gone. Head giddy. Ah !

They saw the flame touch him ; they saw him thrust his arms before his face. They saw him sway, and fall into the crater.

They knew he had lost his life in the tower that night, but they never knew that tower was the tomb of husband and wife.

"Well, Maud, as we are not leaving home for our honeymoon, and there is only one place in the Castle where you have never been—the top of the Tower of Silence, suppose we take lanterns and go there for an hour. I am curious to see this historic tower, this Weird Sister

dowered with a legend of blood. You are not afraid to go."

"I should like to go. There is nothing I would like better. It will be an adventure."

When they were there he said: "I am glad we came. We are promised a glorious view presently. There is the moon rising."

"The moon does not rise there. It rises here," pointing.

"Then there must be a fire."

"That is the direction of the Manor House——."

THE END.

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